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DARK DASHWOOD, THE DESPERATE; or, THE CHILD OF THE SUN.

A TALE OF THE APACHE LAND.

BY MAJOR SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR." "WILD WILL," ETC., ETC.



HERE, I PAINT AN ARROW, POINTING SOUTH-EAST; BUT I ONLY PLACE IT THERE IN CASE MY OTHER INSTRUCTIONS ARE NOT FOUND.

Dark Dashwood, the Desperate;

OR,

The Child of the Sun.

A TALE OF THE APACHE LAND.

BY MAJOR SAM. S. HALL,
("Buckskin Sam.")

CHAPTER I.

A LAMB AMONG WOLVES.

BRIGHT and beautiful as a summer's dream. A picture that would chain the eye of the dullest and stupidest dolt of the human family.

The Southern sun is but just peeping over the prairies, giving its earliest kiss to the dew-sprinkled flowers which turn their delicate many-hued cheeks to receive the welcome paternal warmth, their crystal ornaments changed meanwhile into glittering jewels, in whose shallow depths are reflected all the colors of the rainbow.

The towering trees that fringe the Guadalupe seem like one long gigantic emerald enameled snake, lying lazily in its serpentine track upon the flower-decked plain.

A hazy atmosphere, through which fly myriads of buzzing insects and thousands of gay plumaged birds warbling their thanks at the dawning of another day.

Here and there, knee-deep in the rich grass and flowers, tearing the long dew-flecked spears from the sod in huge mouthfuls, and brushing with their polished hoofs the sweet perfume from the flora are hundreds of sleek cattle, from the bleating calf to the lordly long-horned steer, and flocks of white-wooled sheep, all adding to the paradisaic picture.

Picture! nay, 'tis but the frame; for here, through all this luxuriant loveliness of nature, comes one so tiny, innocent and beautiful, that we are forced, through the influence of our surroundings, to think ourselves in fairyland, with the queen of that imaginary realm before us.

A petite girl, of but seven summers, with infantile features and complexion, laughing eyes of limpid blue shielded by long lashes, cheeks that rival the delicate hue of the rose pearl, and hair of gleaming gold flying behind her in long wavy tresses, resplendent in the rays of the morning sun.

Dashing over and among the prairie flowers, throwing the glittering dewdrops afar on every side, came this fairy-like being upon a milk-white pony, which tosses its head and spurs the sod as if conscious of carrying an angelic rider.

Horse and little equestrienne seem to understand each other, as the ornamented bridle reins hang loosely over the wildly flowing mane; and the child, whose sunny tresses are twined with prairie blossoms, holds in her little hands a wealth of blooms which she is deftly arranging, while from her coral lips a sweet joyous song falls melodiously.

On and on, prancing and capering, this way and that, in a capricious manner, goes the white pony; its childish rider more intent upon the arrangement of her flowers than her surroundings, until they are near the tall timber of the Guadalupe where the sun no longer shines upon them.

At last the bouquets are secured by ribbons and fastened to the sash of the beautiful child, who now gives for the first time a glance of surprise at finding herself so near the woods; and reaching forward, gathers the reins in hand, giving a sudden twitch at the same time, and crying out petulantly:

"Whoa! Blanco; where are you taking me, you silly thing?"

The jerk on the reins, even from those tiny hands, brings Blanco to his haunches, his fore feet pawing the air.

At this moment a sight meets the eyes of both horse and child, which makes the former sport in terror and whirl quickly around and the latter to utter a childish scream, while her cheeks become ghastly in their hue.

A sudden crushing of brush and branch, the swishing of many horses through the bunch grass, and both are in the center of a circle of war-painted, fiendish Apaches.

The circle contracts, and the wild-eyed Mustangs and their wilder-eyed masters form a compact ring of savage brutality around the golden-haired, angelic girl.

There is no escape, through that horrid circle of terrible, repulsive devils.

There is no yell upon the air; the single scream of the affrighted child and the rush of steeds, are the only sounds that have broken the stillness of the bottom.

All gaze upon their captive in silence; while, pale as death, her little hands clasped, her head reverently raised, a childish prayer ascended to Heaven.

This is something for which these savages are unprepared. It comes upon them unexpectedly, and they gaze one at another, and then at their

chief, who is indeed more brutal in appearance, more repulsive in feature than any of his followers.

The childish prayer is ended, and she opens her eyes, a shudder convulsing her little frame as she anxiously turns her head toward her home.

Her lips part once more, as they utter the words—

"Papa! Oh, papa! Come, and take Goldie home!"

This, with a pleading, agonizing gaze, as though she supposed her father to be near at hand.

A grunt of impatience bursts from the hitherto silent circle of grim warriors; and the chief, whose neck is appropriately ornamented with a collar made from the claws of a grizzly bear, grasps the pony's bridle rein, a low guttural order issuing from his lips, and away go the cohort in a galloping square, the chief and captive in its center—a somewhat exaggerated representation of the savage and the civilized, the Indian being more hideous than the average, and the girl a model of refined innocence.

On they went along the borders of the timber; numerous bends in the river hiding them from the view of any who might pursue.

On they went, the captive child in a bewildered daze, making no sign nor sound, and by this silence impressing the savages in a strange degree; as had her unusual actions when first taken, and her surpassing loveliness.

Never had they beheld a being so completely awe-inspiring; filling them, as she did, with the idea of something from another world.

CHAPTER II.

THE RENEGADE.

SUDDENLY the Apaches turn an abrupt bend in the river and are greeted with a triumphant yell, as a white man, riding a magnificent black stallion, comes bounding toward them.

He who thus meets the savage band is a powerful man of commanding appearance, symmetrically formed, and dressed in the slashed and button-decorated buckskins of Mexico.

High-topped boots incase his feet, upon the heels of which are long roweled spurs, while a wide-brimmed sombrero sits jauntily upon his head. Long hair, black as the raven's wing, is brushed back from his ears; and black, piercing eyes glitter snake-like below a mas-live forehead. Upon chin and lip are a heavy mustache and imperial, while his face is bronzed by the southern sun and the smoke of many camp-fires.

Certainly, in the distance, a prepossessing man, evidently born to command; but a nearer approach shows upon his face a desperate, revengeful, traitorous character, which one would not care to meet in a lonely place if he had aught that was valuable about his person.

"Buena muchachoes!" shouted the white man as he approached; his horse snorting as though the sight and sound of those he was nearing was unusual, and to be dreaded.

"Buena muchachoes!" the Apaches are as cunning as the black wolves of the llanos, they will drive a hundred horses back to their villages. Chief you have done well. You have won the rifle; it is yours, with my friendship, which all men crave and at the same time fear. What!—Madre de Dios!"

The Indians in front had parted, and the black horse bounded into the square beside the chief, as his rider uttered this ejaculation, commenced in astonishment and ending in feelings not unmixed with awe as he came within full view of the captive child who seeing a white man, reached out her little hands, and pleadingly exclaimed:

"Oh! take Goldie home to papa! Take Goldie away from these bad Indians—Goldie and Blanco wants to go home!"

"Cospita!" muttered the white man, in vexation. "Who is this? Spotted Leopard has made a mistake!"

"Spotted Leopard has made no mistake. He watched the casa blanco, and the little squaw came from there, but the Good Spirit has smiled upon her. He has sent the sunshine into her hair. Spotted Leopard will never stain his knife with her blood. Her scalp will never hang from an Apache lance, or scalp-pole."

A low murmur of approbation ran around the warlike circle, who sat their horses like grim statues, all facing the singular and widely-differing trio, showing veneration in their glances at the young captive, and casting looks at the white man that boded him no good, in the event of his attempting aught to her injury.

"By St. Iago! I should say not, chief. Let no harm befall her. You will hear from me again. This business was arranged between me and your principal. Lone Wolf will divide the horses. You will find the animals in a corral five miles above here, in charge of a Mexican named Antonio. Here is the promised rifle and I have tobacco for you all."

This was spoken in a hurried manner; the white man avoiding the glance and pleading of the captive, as he passed a carbine and pouches to the chief, and a pair of mallets over the saddle of the nearest brave.

"Diablo! I must brace up. The sight of that little one makes a coward of me," he muttered, as his gifts were received with grudgingly given grunts of thanks. "However, I must make a sure thing of it. Little girl, what is your name?"

"Goldie Somers; and I want to go home. Oh! please take me home, and I'll pray for you. I want to see papa and mamma!" and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Curses on my weakness! I can't stand this. My God, D. r— But I must keep my name to myself; I came near letting it out, and the reds would perhaps speak of it to some one. I'm darned if I ain't getting to be a desperate bell-hound to condemn one so fair and innocent to such a fate!" And dashing spurs into the flanks of his horse, he yelled, as the square of Indians again opened to allow his departure:

"Vamonos! Vamonos!" And then sped like the wind over the plain to the south, shaking his clinched fist down the Guadalupe toward the home of her, an only child whom he had caused to be torn from loving parents and friends by blood-craving, merciless savages.

No sooner had the renegade, for such we know him to be, spurred away from the Apaches, than the latter again galloped up-stream as before; and Goldie, seeing that no help was to be gained from him she had pleaded to, childlike drew her kerchief from her pocket and dried her eyes. Upon replacing it, her hand came in contact with a small silver music-box, a gift from her father, which she always carried, and unconsciously she pressed the spring while withdrawing her hand.

A subdued air from the little instrument sounded upon the ears of the Indians and brought them to a sudden halt; then, when they had realized that the strange melody, a combination of sweet sounds such as they had never before heard or dreamed of, proceeded from their pretty captive, they were filled with superstitious wonder, and their glances one to another while the music lasted, showed plainly that they were now more than ever convinced that the child was possessed of powers given her by the Good Spirit of their traditions. The chief raised himself in his saddle, gave a gesture for the attention of his braves, and pointing skyward, exclaimed with awe:

"Child of the Sun!"

A grunt of approbation ran around the circle as they gazed with superstitious reverence upon the captive maiden.

Goldie, young though she was, began to realize to some extent the power she held over her savage captors, and began forthwith to use it in a despotic manner, which served to insure not only her safety, but all the attention and comfort that could be procured in the wild land through which they were journeying. Day after day she became a tyrannical queen, and the Apaches her willing slaves, thinking her, as they did, sent from the other world as the guardian spirit of their tribe, and to work their benefit.

The little music-box, with her name engraved upon its cover, was a talisman; and the simple-minded Indians listened to its talk when she wound it up, with arms respectfully folded and never daring to touch it.

As day by day passed, the ever-varying scenery, the wild surroundings, the galloping horses delivered by Antonio to the hand being driven on ahead, the exciting buffalo hunts before her eyes, in a measure drew her mind from thoughts of home and those she loved for the time; but when the shadows of night fell like a pall over the prairies, she would cover beneath her couch of robes and weep herself to sleep.

Flowers were gathered for her, because she loved them; beautiful birds were caught to amuse her; and delicious game hunted for the "Child-of-the-Sun"—the Child of the Good Spirit.

Thus on, until the little white pony, Blanco, fell dead upon the plain; until the little captive, worn and weary, was reverently carried in turn by the burly warriors in their arms, each proud of the burden.

On, on, until the little heart lost all hope of ever seeing the papa and mamma she had left so far behind her.

On, on; over prairies, through dense forests, over parched plains and through deep canyons—on to Apache Land!

CHAPTER III.

DARK NAME, AND DARKER DEEDS.

TEN years have passed since Goldie Somers was stolen by Apaches, hired to do the dastard deed by Rudolph Woodspeed, a man who had arrived in San Antonio soon after Colonel John Somers and wife had reached the Alamo City.

Little did those with whom he associated care whence he came, or anything in regard to his past life, so long as he spent his gold freely among them; but we propose to explain something in regard to his antecedents which will enable the reader to understand the character of the man, and, as far as possible, his movements during these ten years.

Rudolph Woodspeed was the son and only child of a wealthy planter in Mississippi, who owned and worked more than a hundred slaves;

and his parents had indulged him in every possible manner.

In this way he grew up, with servants on every hand to attend his slightest call, and who were treated more like dogs than human beings by their young master.

Many a serious fault, not to say crime, was laid at his door, and he became the terror of the neighborhood.

Not many miles from the plantation of the Woodspeeds, lived two other planters, not as wealthy as the former, but still well to do in this world's goods. One of these men was named Somers, the other Dashington; the former having a son of the same age as Rudolph Woodspeed, and the latter a daughter some three years the junior of the two young men, and the reigning belle and beauty of the country around.

Rudolph had fixed his mind upon Dora Dashington, the daughter of the last-named planter, as the woman of all others who should be his wife. He had sworn it by all the gods and fiends; and had governed his actions to forward the keeping of his oath, more by foul means than by endeavoring to merit the lady's regard.

But man only proposes, and the suit of young Woodspeed was not looked upon with favor by Dora, whose affections were centered upon John Somers, a young man of the most exemplary character who had loved her devotedly from childhood, although this was not known beyond the two families who were most interested.

Having been accustomed to have whatever he wished, no matter how unreasonable, and to think in his pride that he stood pre-eminent above all other men, his astonishment and anger may be imagined, when, having thrown himself at the feet of Dora Dashington, he was kindly, but firmly and decidedly rejected.

Words cannot express the rage which he showed to such an extent upon the instant that he filled the heart of the young lady with terror, causing her to thank God that she had escaped being linked for life to such a man.

He left her presence, swearing by all the fiends in Hades that no other man should wed her while he lived, and then plunged into a whirl of dissipation during which he grossly insulted a young man in a neighboring town who challenged him in the duello.

In this encounter Rudolph killed his opponent, and as the latter was one who moved in the highest circles the gentry afterward turned the cold shoulder upon his slayer, it being generally believed that he had taken a cowardly advantage. After this occurrence, Rudolph was seized with delirium, lying for some time seriously ill, and when he was once more able to take his seat in the saddle he learned that John Somers had married Dora Dashington, and that the happy pair had gone to Texas to settle.

Like a hungry wolf deprived of its prey, he rushed into his father's office and demanded money to take him to Texas, swearing to kill John Somers on sight. No reasoning from his parents could dissuade him from this resolve; tears and prayers were of no avail, and he repaid the life-long love and indulgence which had been his by leaving his home without any seeming regret, or even a formal farewell.

With the money that he had forced from his father, it was an easy matter for him to trace those for whom he was in search, as they had traveled through the principal towns toward the Alamo City.

Before Rudolph had been in San Antonio twenty-four hours he was face to face with his successful rival, but in a position which gave him no advantage. The result was that he received a shot in his shoulder, John Somers escaping without a scratch.

When he recovered from his wound, received in a way of which he would vouchsafe no explanation, Somers and his wife had disappeared.

It was long months before Rudolph had information, through paid spies, of the location of the ranch on which Somers had located, and also learned that the woman who had scorned his love was the mother of a female infant. This information somewhat changed his plans, for he now saw a way in which he could heap misery upon both John and Dora, and he awaited his time for the commission of the inhuman deed that he had hatched in his fiendish brain.

Meantime he drank to excess, became an expert at cards, and paid flying visits to Austin, Houston and Galveston. From the latter city he frequently drew upon his father for funds, and paid no attention to the letters from home pleading for his return.

At the time of the opening of our narrative, Rudolph Woodspeed had many so-called friends through the Lone Star State, and had not as yet committed any crime that could debar him from their society. He frequented the mansions of the wealthy, and was well known and warmly welcomed in all the gambling-houses and fandangoes from the Capital to the Rio Grande; but after the damning crime which is detailed in the opening chapter of our story, his ways were in strange and blood-stained places. He no longer walked the streets and

plazas, but was ever to be found through the night at the gaming-table.

His father, after many unavailing requests for his return home, finally refused any further remittances, and he was forced to rely upon his own resources.

The knowledge that he had affiliated with the hostile Apaches, had paid them to carry far from home and friends a child who was incapable of harming him, wrought upon his mind, brute though he was, and the pleading looks of Goldie Somers were before him day and night until he had drank himself into a stupor.

He was soon forced to become a dealer at the same table where he had laid down thousands, and some whispered that he played short and waxed cards; but this was only a whisper, for more than one man had been shot by him in the Bull's Head, the most noted gambling-house in all Western Texas.

So things went on from bad to worse with Rudolph Woodspeed. He was no longer known by the name that he had brought with him, but from his habits and character he acquired the sobriquet of "Dark," and the patronymic Woodspeed became, in that unaccountable manner peculiar to the frontier, changed to Dashwood. His former name, in the whirl, excitement and change of the border, was speedily forgotten, and, during the ten years which we have passed over, his movements were calculated to make his cognomen most appropriate, for he was, long before those years had expired, known and hunted as a road-agent, murderer and horse-thief.

Having in this chapter shown Dark Dashwood's character and antecedents, we are ready to proceed, for, as he is to be a prominent actor in this life-drama, it was necessary that these preliminary facts should be known.

CHAPTER IV.

THE APACHE QUEEN.

HIGH, rugged, craggy mountains rear their adamant peaks upon the south, west, and north, leaving to the eastward a huge gateway through which the sun casts its smiles upon the little picturesque vale so strongly guarded.

At each side of the entrance to this natural amphitheater are massive boulders, piled one upon another by a power stronger than that of a Titan.

Here and there are bunches of stunted cedars and bushes which afford concealment, and shelter from the sun, to the vigilant sentinels posted to overlook the plains below. It is only by most difficult paths, and these at but few points, that the mountain side can be scaled.

The valley is indeed a secure retreat for those whose lodges dot its western edge near the base of the steep mountain side.

This is Apache land, these are Apache mountains; and the scores of bronzed braves in the valley, and upon the natural battlements at its entrance, are Apache warriors. It is a perfect Paradise; dotted with groves and cacti, rich in the most beautiful and various-hued flowers, while from the rank grass peep up a multitude of those rare southern flora which throw out a heavy, sweet perfume.

Hundreds of wild-eyed, quick-motioned mustangs and mules are scattered all about; kept from roaming by a line of mounted guards across the entrance.

Erected in a crescent curve, the points of which turn toward the entrance to the valley, are a score or more of lodges, made from the hide of the buffalo, that has been scraped and bleached until nearly as white as canvas, and each ornamented with figures and hieroglyphics picturing the bravest and most eventful deeds of the owner.

Opposite each lodge, leaning and hanging from a sapling frame-work, are the arms, shield, blanket and paint-bag of the occupant; and, seated upon gaudily-decorated robes near at hand, are groups of warriors, some reclining in an indolent attitude, others scraping and tipping arrows, or cleaning their rifles and carbines.

Squaws are busily at work in all directions; some dressing game, others scraping hides, or decorating the same, and in their highly ornamental costumes presenting a wild and romantic picture.

The profusion of silver ornaments upon the horses, furniture, arms and persons of these Indians, tell of profitable raids into Mexico; while the striking beauty of many of the squaws, in strong contrast to the ugliness of others, shows that no Apache blood runs in their veins, but that they have been torn from their homes in Montezuma land. Most of these maidens appear to be contented and happy; and so they are, for they have forgotten the homes of their childhood, and know no other life than that which they are now leading.

Many a brave who proudly stalks from lodge to lodge would be a peon on the other side of the Rio Grande, had not an Apache war party swept through his native village, and after killing and scalping the parents, bore them and many others to their mountain retreat to rear them as their own. This kidnapping of children had for some time been a necessity to the Apaches, as their prolonged and bloody wars with their stronger neighbors, the Coman-

ches, to say nothing of their losses with the whites, had thinned their war-ranks to an extent that had become very alarming to the chiefs.

By thus increasing their tribe, and the adoption of many Mexican outlaws, many mongrel Spanish and Mexican expressions had been engrafted upon their language, besides introducing habits and modes of cooking and living generally peculiar to Mexico.

Previous to the acquisition of Texas by conquest, the Apache hunting-grounds were within the limits of Mexico, and frequent raids by the soldiers of the Republic into Apache land were punished by a terrible war upon the smaller towns of Chihuahua and Coahuila, the booty from which placed the Apaches far above the neighboring tribes in the matter of their personal possessions. But in our inspection of this Apache village, and our description of its inmates, together with their occupations and condition, we have overlooked the brightest spot in the savage scene. Brightest, because occupied by a being beautiful herself in the extreme, and surrounded by all the available beauties of this strange land.

Seated upon a pile of panther-skins, under an awning composed entirely of freshly-plucked flowers, the dewdrops still clinging to their petals, is a maid of some seventeen summers, ravishingly lovely in form and feature, her rich golden hair flowing in profusion about her gracefully modeled shoulders, and lying in heavy wavy tresses over the spotted robes upon which she reclines. Her skin is white as the lily, the blush of the wild rose resting upon her cheek—this and the perfect chiseling of her features betraying her pure Anglo-Saxon blood.

She is attired in fawn-skins, richly embroidered in beadwork, and tiny silver ornaments tinkle from every seam, while a coronet, composed of bright colored feathers, adorns her queenly brow.

Her manner proves in a moment that, although, seemingly out of place among the savage horde, she is, or assumes to be, contented.

The respect, approaching adoration, with which the young squaws attend this beautiful maiden, together with the frequent glances, denoting the same feeling, cast in her direction by the different warriors, show that she is a person of no little importance in the tribe.

This young girl, surrounded with all the regal splendor of savage life, is the Apache queen—Child-of-the-Sun.

Captured, as we know, when very young, she had, being very intelligent and observing, foretold the success or defeat of various martial expeditions; predicted storms, droughts and diseases, which, not a little to her own surprise, had happened accordingly—all this had rendered her a person of greater influence in the tribe than ever was female before, and not only insuring her against harm from the Indians, but actually making them subservient to her will, even to the cruel and repulsive chief, who, previous to the advent of Child-of-the-Sun, had never even listened to the counsels of old Cochise, his superior.

Child-of-the-Sun, realizing the impossibility of escape from this iron-bound retreat to her far-off home, had philosophically made the best of her condition, studying to maintain her character as an oracle, and thereby occupy a position of security, until an opportunity might providentially offer for her to return to the loved ones, still dearly remembered and cherished. But not by any word or action of hers could the keen-eyed Apaches find cause to think that such ideas ever entered the mind of their revered young queen and prophetess; although, in her councils with Lone Wolf, she had oft betrayed her aversion to the life that she was forced to live, and used her influence with that chief to wring from him a promise that he would restore her to her parents.

Not fifty paces from the flowery canopy of Child-of-the-Sun, opposite the largest lodge in the village, there reclines lazily upon an outspread serape, an Indian so repulsive in appearance that the mere sight of him was sufficient to cause an involuntary shudder. Black hair, coarse as that upon the tail of a horse, hangs about his head and over his shoulders in wild abundance; and, being cut in front even with the eyebrows, covers the forehead entirely with a fashionable bang. A hideous scar, running from eye to lip, gives a Satanic expression appropriate to his character; while his eyes, as they glance suspiciously around, are like those of a wild beast at bay.

A bear-claw collar clasps his thick neck. Buckskin shirt, leggings and moccasins make up his attire, while in his belt is thrust a huge bowie-knife, and a brace of Colt's revolvers, his bow, quiver and shield hanging behind him.

If one were to look the camp over and examine each brave as closely as he might, he would find none half as repulsive, hideous and ferocious in appearance. Nor were there any who could approach him in thirst for blood, though all were bad enough in all conscience.

As Lone Wolf reclines, resting on his elbow, and puffing a cigarette, we see him as he is; of medium height, far from corpulent, but possessing an iron frame and sinews of steel.

He is just as I have described him, to the letter; for I have met him both in peace and in war, and he was voted the most brutal murderer, and merciless, heartless fiend that ever had the semblance of humanity.

CHAPTER V.

ON HIS NATIVE HEATH.

LONE WOLF is now alone, and none dare intrude upon him. None dare approach him without his orders to that effect, for his temper is like that of a hungry panther; indeed his love of solitude, and his fierceness even when a youth, gained for him the name that he bears.

Suddenly, with a low, impatient growl, the Apache chief throws away the stump of his cigarette, and, bounding to his feet, glances about the valley and around the heights, then stalks toward the shelter of flowers, the young squaws gliding from his path, and retiring beyond hearing.

Halting near the bower, he folded his arms, and, glancing within, exclaimed, in as soft a voice as was possible for him.

"Child-of-the-Sun is glad. She is in the valley where flowers bloom and birds sing. Lone Wolf is sad. His knife rusts in its sheath. He must go on the war-path.

"Child-of-the-Sun is as happy as she can be when she is away from those that she loves. Lone Wolf has said many times that she will forget her father, that the face of her mother who nursed her so tenderly will fade forever from her memory, but he is mistaken. I see them in my dreams; their tear-drops fall on my face, and their moans awaken me. Many, many moons off—I cannot count them—you tore me from the arms of those who loved me more than themselves. Why did you not kill me then? Why did you keep me all these weary moons to hope and cry?"

"When Lone Wolf found Child-of-the-Sun upon the prairie, he had watched for her long. A bad white man had given him a hundred horses to steal her. Lone Wolf swore to keep her for the white man, but should he come for her now his scalp would hang on the shield of Lone Wolf. The Apaches cannot part with Child-of-the-Sun. Lone Wolf would not know when his death-cry would sound; he would not know when the war-path was open. The pale-faces are dogs. They love not Child-of-the-Sun as do the Apaches. She could never go the long trail to the log lodges of her people. She must be glad that she is with Lone Wolf. Her bed is soft. Her food is the tender fawns. The flowers she loves grow in the valleys, and the birds sing sweet songs in her ears."

Noticing that the chief was growing impatient, and realizing that, as on many occasions, she would gain nothing by conversing in this strain, the young girl, although her heart was aching for some grounds upon which to build a hope of future deliverance from captivity, assumed an air of unconcern and inquired:

"What can Child-of-the-Sun do for the Apache chief?"

"Lone Wolf is sad," he repeated. "His knife rusts in its sheath. He must go on the war-path. When the buzzards fly over our lodges, Child-of-the-Sun can tell whence they came, by the flapping of their wings. She can tell what they have seen. When the panther screams she knows if danger has come to an Apache brave. When the black wolf howls or the coyote barks, she knows what they talk, and the little birds sing tales in her ears that Lone Wolf does not understand. She knows the wishes of the Good and of the Bad Spirits, and every breeze talks to her. She is the Great Medicine of the Apaches. She is the queen of our tribe, and came down from beyond the sun to save the Apaches from destruction. Lone Wolf will know when the time comes to go to his fathers. He will know when he is to take the first step on the long dark trail. Child-of-the-Sun will tell him."

"Lone Wolf cannot sleep. He hears the tread of Texas on Apache land. He hears the sound of their rifles, and he knows that the buffalo that belong to the red-man is falling upon the prairies like dry leaves when the north winds blow. His blood is hot and it runs in his veins like the mad waters of the Pecos when he sees what is coming on Apache land. The war-path is open. It points to the Big Water. My young braves are ready. Their knives are sharp. Their quivers are full of arrows. Their mustangs are fat. It is enough. Lone Wolf will go. His belt will hang heavy with scalps. His trail will be wide when his young men drive the horses of the Texas back to Apache land. I have spoken."

"Child-of-the-Sun is happy when with the flowers and birds," answered the queen. "Why is not Lone Wolf contented? He has plenty of fish and game, and more mustangs than warriors, squaws and papposes."

"Lone Wolf is never content," said the chief, impatiently, his eyes kindling with excitement. "His ears hunger for the death-yell of his enemies. The smoke of battle, and the smell of blood make him laugh. He is not a coyote that he should hide in a hole while the Comanche tears the scalps from the heads of the Texas. The white thieves shall build no huts on Apache

land while Lone Wolf can bend a bow. He has sworn it to the Bad Spirit."

"Lone Wolf should not swear by the Bad Spirit, or he will come in the night and take him down the deep canyon."

"There is no Good Spirit!" exclaimed the chief, bitterly and earnestly. "Else why would he let the white dogs come to Apache land? Why would he let the diablo Texas kill the deer and buffalo and antelope, and leave them for the wolves? They shoot the game to see it fall, that should fill the mouths of our tribe. Apaches never kill the buffalo but when hungry. Their bones cover the trails of the Texas. Child-of-the-Sun is the Good Spirit of the Apaches. She can tell when the rain will fall. She can tell when the wind will blow. What does she see? Will Lone Wolf take many scalps? Will the white dogs howl for mercy when they hear his war-cry?"

Child-of-the-Sun closed her eyes for a moment, and then answered:

"I hear the war-cries of Apache braves, and the yells of the Texas. I hear the thunder of many guns. I see Lone wolf. He is coming back to Apache land with many horses and white captives, but the Texas are on his trail."

"Does Lone Wolf come back to the valley? Will he see Child-of-the-Sun again?"

"Lone Wolf will come back to the valley. He will see the Child-of-the-Sun again."

A terrific, triumphant, exultant yell broke from the lips of the Apache Chief at this answer, which sounded down the valley, echoing and re-echoing from cliff and crag and basaltic rift.

No sooner had it sounded than the warriors about the camp sprung to their feet, and the stragglers down the vale bounded toward the village; while the rattle of buffalo bones, and the *tum-tum* of the signal drums calling to council, filled the air.

CHAPTER VI.

GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

WHEN the wild yell of Lone Wolf rung out, and the chief had stalked proudly back to his former position opposite his own lodge, Child-of-the-Sun beckoned to one of the young Mexican girls, who soon appeared by the bower of her mistress, and queen with a beautiful pinto pony caparisoned with a tiny embossed and gold-mounted saddle and bridle.

As the youthful queen bounded gracefully from her floral throne to the saddle, the pony gave a whinny of delight and darted down the valley, seeming proud of his lovely burden.

The Mexican girl mounted another horse, and followed her mistress; while the warriors, coming in answer to the signal of their chief, stepped respectfully from the path of the fairy-like girl, and fawn-like pony.

No surprise was manifested by Lone Wolf or his braves, as it was her custom thus to act when council or war-dance was called, and also when captives were tortured; and no concern was felt as to her safety, as they knew she would not ride beyond the rocky gateway of the valley.

Loud rattled the bones, and the dull *tum-tum* sounded wild and weird above the iron-rusted crags, and through the deep chasms of the mountains, as one by one, and in small groups, the Apache braves who had been scattered about the valley entered the crescent of lodges, and seated themselves in a circle about their chief. There were nearly a hundred, besides those on duty as sentinels.

When all had become seated the pipe was quickly passed around from mouth to mouth, returning to the chief, who sprung immediately to his feet, his eyes blazing with fury, a satanic expression upon his beast-like features that was horrible to witness, while his voice burst upon the air as strong as the roar of a buffalo bull.

"Warriors of the Apaches! Children of Apache land! Lone Wolf has been with the squaws long enough. The spider has built a nest in his rifle. His knife sticks fast in his sheath. Dew has fallen many times on your arrow points. The war eagle of the Apaches has put its head under its wing in shame, and the coyote coward barks without fear among our lodges. The Texas laugh, and say that the Apaches are squaws. The Comanche sounds his war-cry over the Pecos, and says the Apaches are asleep. The buzzards no longer fly above our village. They have long waited for our fires to burn out, that they might pick the bones that we have gnawed. Shall we make holes and live in the ground, like the Diggers? Have you forgotten the war-cry of our tribe?"

A low grunt of shame and dissatisfaction and anger ran around the circle, and the black, snake-like eyes of the braves glowed and snapped, as their fingers clutched at their scalping-knives.

"No!" thundered Lone Wolf. "We have not forgotten the war-cry of our fathers. The Comanche shall hear it beyond the Pecos, and the Texas shall hear it and hide with quivering lips behind their legs."

"Warriors, the time has come! We have been asleep. We are now awake. We will go toward the rising sun—toward the big water. The sky

shall be red at night, from the burning log lodges. The air shall be filled with the death-howls of the white dogs and the screams of their squaws and papposes. The wolves and buzzards will follow our trail, for they know when Apaches go on the war-path. They will go hungry no longer. Put on your paint and get ready for the war-dance. Waste no time in talk. Let him who nurses fear in his breast put on calico and stay with the squaws. Child-of-the-Sun has said that Lone Wolf will come back. His belt will be heavy with scalps. His trail will be wide with many horses. When the sun comes again he will go on the war-path. Lone Wolf has spoken."

As the chief brought his speech to an end he sprung into his lodge, the warriors bounding each to his own to prepare for the war-dance.

CHAPTER VII.

A RETROSPECT.

SOME two months previous to the occurring of these events in the Apache mountains, a small train of settlers' wagons came to a halt in a horse-shoe bend of the Brazos river, at a point within the precincts of what is now known as Hood county, and but a short ride from Comanche Peak.

The worn and weary men, women and children gave a shout of joy as the guide ordered a halt and informed them that they had arrived at their destination.

The oxen were unyoked, camp-fires were soon blazing, and as the night fell over the earth all had partaken of a hearty supper. A guard was posted at the neck of the bend, everything being considered secure toward the river, and all congratulated themselves upon being at the end of their long and tedious journey.

The guide, universally known as Old Rocky, and who pronounced himself a hard nut for the Indians to crack, after making a detour of the camp, giving directions to those who were strangers to frontier life, came up to the principal fire, and leaning his rifle against a tree, proceeded to light his pipe.

Seated by this fire was a man in the prime of life, but whose hair was thickly sprinkled with gray, and his face drawn, evidently by a long and heart-cankering trouble.

Old Rocky, having lighted his pipe and seated himself upon the ground, leaned back with a satisfied air, his hands clasping his knees. Puffing for a moment in silence, he exclaimed in an abrupt manner:

"Colonel Somers, I ain't often 'quisitive—I us'ly 'tends to my own biz and lets others 'tend to tharn, but I would like mighty well ter know why yer locates so danged high up on the Brazos when thar's land enough spied out atween this 'n San Antone, whar reds ain't liable ter bush in on yer sudden-like and spile yer prospec's fer stock-raisin'! An' then ag'in, 'pears ter me like resky biz ter fetch the weemin' an' young 'uns inter danger."

"Mr. Young," said Col. Somers, who seldom addressed the old scout by his frontier appellation, "if you will seat yourself here by my side, I will explain some matters to you that I seldom mention, but which are ever present in my mind. I should not at this time burden another with my great sorrow, did I not feel assured that you are not only a friend to me and mine, but that you may be able to help me in the future, and your somewhat abrupt and pointed question has forced me to an explanation which I should have before many days given you unasked. The young people are engaged in conversation near the wagons, and will not interrupt us, I think, at present."

Old Rocky seated himself by the side of the colonel, and refilled his pipe, anticipating a long confab; and very strange it appeared to him that he should feel such a curiosity to know the secret history of a man whom he had met for the first time but a month since.

"You have doubtless noticed, Mr. Young," he began, with a questioning glance, "that I have the appearance of being dejected in spirits—in fact, most of the time oblivious to my surroundings."

"Waal, ya-as; I has noticed yer did 'pear ter be blue about ther gills mostly. No 'fense, curn'l; I'm blunt an' plain spoken, an' not given ter highfalutin lingo."

"Never mind apologies. I know you to be an honest and a brave man; but to proceed—I fitted out my train in San Antonio, but I am not a new settler in Texas, as perhaps you have ascertained by the conversation of my people. About eighteen years ago I located upon a section of land on the Guadalupe river, and went into the stock business, besides putting in some corn and wheat. I came originally from Mississippi, where I married my wife; and as I am about to make a confidant of you, I will tell you the whole story. My father was not a wealthy man, but our nearest neighbor was a planter, who owned and worked a large number of slaves, his son being the same age as myself—a wild, dissipated rake, who fell in love with my wife, before our marriage, I mean—and swore to have her in spite of me. By a well-conducted plan we were married, and started for Texas when he was on a drunken spree; and we arrived in San Antonio without hearing that

he was in pursuit, although he had sworn to follow us to Hades if we succeeded in eluding him. My wife held him in mortal dread and terror, he having threatened to kill her did she ever marry any one but himself.

"You must understand that in those days, and in that State, a wealthy slave-owner was king of the district in which he lived, and a man of moderate means had no chance of opposing him in any pet scheme. But to return to the main point of the case. We stopped at the Plaza House in San Antonio, while I got my land-warrant and engaged some workmen to go out and erect a log house. I purchased wagons, mules and farming implements, and was ready to start on a certain day.

"On the night before, I happened to pass the Bull's Head, and hearing a familiar voice, I glanced at the bar-room. Just at the moment that I looked in I caught the eye of my rival and deadly enemy, who is now known as Dark Dashwood, and comprehended in an instant that he had followed me for revenge. I felt that my life was in danger, for I saw his hand glide round his belt, and our revolvers cocked and cracked at the same moment. I felt his bullet tear along my breast, and saw him reel and fall to the floor; then I ran around to the back of the building, and entering Commerce street, went directly up the same to the Plaza House. I communicated the details of the affair to my wife, who became very much alarmed, and insisted upon leaving the city that night. My reasons for not entering the Bull's Head and explaining the situation of affairs between Dark Dashwood and myself were that I knew him to be surrounded by a crowd of his own kind, who would, in all probability, kill the man whom they had seen shoot their *confreere*; for although not dangerously wounded, he was not likely to give any explanation.

"Luckily for me he was not able to search the town that night, and before the next morning had dawned myself and wife proceeded to the Guadalupe in an ambulance, our wagons following. There I built my ranch, as I have told you, and established myself as a stockman, having several servants. In course of time—but I am wearying your patience, Mr. Young."

"Curn'l, yer kin jist sling hit out ter the end. I'm a-listenin'."

"Well, to proceed, we had a child born to us—an angelic little daughter. She was the sunlight of our eyes, and was fairly worshiped by us both. Like a fairy, she tripped over the prairie opposite our ranch each morning for a tiny bouquet to place at the plates of her father and mother at the breakfast-table. Before she was quite seven years of age I purchased and presented her with a little white pony, which became her constant companion, and seated upon this pony, on her seventh birthday, she bade us good-by in the early morning, and galloped up the Guadalupe to get, as she said, some new and pretty flowers she had discovered in bud on the previous day. Mr. Young, we have never seen her since that hour! You may know that it came near killing us with agonizing grief; indeed, it has been eating our very lives away ever since, and has caused us to grow old before our time. We have never had any other child. Mamie and Hattie yonder are the children of a deceased brother, and Ernest, although supposed to be my own son, is only so by adoption.

"Goldie, as we used to call our long-lost daughter, I am positive still lives. I will say, for I see that you look surprised, that we found her trail, and also that of a score of Indians. There was also the sign of a shod horse among them, and as I had frequently received threatening letters from Dark Dashwood previous to the abduction of my child, I always have, and always shall lay our awful bereavement at his door, and sould God choose to bring me face to face with him again, I trust I shall be able to force him to a full confession. I expended so much money in the search for my golden-haired little girl that I was compelled to sell out my ranch at a sacrifice, and I have come this far from the settlements for what some may consider a very peculiar reason.

"Strange to say, although I have seemed so despondent during this journey, I have never had the hope of finding my daughter so strong before. Each and every step of my horse toward the home of the red-man has seemed to bring me so much nearer to my lost darling. You may think this foolish, and perhaps bordering on superstition, but I seem to hear her voice on the prairie air, borne on the western breeze, calling to me in loving tones, 'Come, father; come!'"

CHAPTER VIII. A FAMILY COUNCIL.

AT this point in the colonel's narrative, sobs shook his frame and he buried his face in his hands; while the old scout, much to his own surprise, felt the tear-drops as they welled from their long dried founts, and ran down his grizzly beard.

Hastily wiping his eyes on his buckskin sleeve, Old Rocky directed his glance away from the colonel, in respect for his deep grief, while he poked about the fire for a coal to light

the pipe which he had long since suffered to go out.

Sending out the smoke in quick, nervous puffs, the scout at last turned toward Col. Somers, and seeing him entirely prostrated with his great sorrow, thrust his horny hand slowly up along his sleeve, and gently clasping the hand of his sobbing friend in his own, gave it a sympathetic pressure.

"Thank you, Mr. Young. Excuse me, but God knows I have had enough trouble to make a child of me. What!" he exclaimed in surprise, not unmixed with gratitude; "do you drop a tear for my sorrow? Heaven bless you! Give me your hand again—I am doubly your friend, now that you know the harrowing pain that has gradually eaten away my life, and can sympathize with me."

"I hope I ain't an iron man, curn'l, though I gives in that I hasn't be'n used to mournin' much; 'specially in lettin' loose salt water out'n my peepers, 'cept when I's on the alkeril plains in a high wind. But yer story 'bout that leetle gale aire enough ter make a road-agent weep. How long ago wer' this thing brought onter ye?"

"It will be just ten years, the first of next month," answered Col. Somers: "and if my little Goldie has lived through it all, she is now, or will be then, seventeen years of age. I should feel better did I know that she was dead, although other hands than mine had laid her in the ground."

"What tribe o' reds war down the Guadalupe when she war tuk? Yer must 'a' know'd by ther sign."

"The scouts I had on the trail pronounced them Apaches. Big-foot Wallace was with me several times scouting after some intelligence of her, but I forgot to say that the fiend Dark Dashwood appears in a very mysterious manner once a year to either my wife or myself, and taunts us in regard to the happiness of our married life, asking in a sneering manner after our daughter. This convinces me that he knows her whereabouts, and was concerned in her capture. He is, on these occasions, always mounted on a fleet horse, and has several times shot at me, the balls flying close to my head which he could easily have hit had he wished; but he does this only to torture me, and keep me in constant fear. He seems to pay these visits only to increase our grief and enjoy the sight of it. I am not old in years, but in sorrow; and he knows this, and would rather see me live on and suffer than kill me."

"I know ther cuss well by sight, curn'l; he are snakier than a Greaser, an' San Antone folks has got a reward out for him, stiff or kickin'. Reckon yer heerd tell o' his stoppin' the Fort Clark hearse, an' robbin' the mail, 'sides puttin' a ball through a passenger's head? I reckon I should deal off a few years of my time, an' use 'em up a runnin' after him, allers bein' ready ter run butt ag'in' him an' choke some information out'n him."

"I hadn't heard of this robbery, Young; and I wish from the bottom of my heart that justice may overtake him; but not before I have ascertained if he knows where my child was taken, and I have squared accounts with him."

"Reckon ther won't be enough left of his carkiss for ther officers 'bout then, curn'l. How come yer ter know 'bout this bend?"

"I happened upon this spot by accident when I was returning down country from Fort Belknap, where I had gone to see a young girl who had been taken from the Indians by Edward Burleson's company of rangers. I saw that the natural defenses were excellent. That by building a corral on the neck of this bend, and running a high oak picket-fence each way from the same to the river, then felling brush or branches all along the bank, this would make a most secure retreat. Besides this I have an idea synonymous with the expression that 'a cannon ball never strikes twice in the same place.' In other words, that the Indians will not be the agents in thrusting more sorrow upon my head."

"Don't yer bet high on that, curn'l. Yer might as well try ter locate a lightnin'-bug in a dark night a'ter ther cuss has shut up his wings, as a red devil when ha'r are trumps an' ther cards is layin' roun' permisc'us like."

"The female members of the family will never be left here alone, Mr. Young. I have a number of reliable men, and what few negroes I have will fight for me to the last. Ernest, my adopted son, is a brave boy—a little too reckless, I fear. Ah! Here they come. How do you like your new location, my dears?"

Two tall, graceful girls of seventeen and nineteen now walked arm in arm up to the camp-fire, dressed plainly in neat-figured calico. They were of about the same height. Mamie, the younger, blue-eyed and flaxen-haired; Hattie, hazel-eyed and with dark-brown tresses.

There was a partly-veiled sorrowful sympathy in their manner, which showed the observant scout that they held locked in their bosoms the sad secret that had just been confided to him.

Col. Somers and Old Rocky arose from their recumbent positions, and the girls each clasped a hand of their uncle as Hattie replied to his question:

"With what we have seen of our surroundings, dear uncle, we are satisfied that we have arrived at the promised land; but we are forced to confess that in the dark shadows of the wood, our imagination conjured up the dreadful Indians we have heard so much about on our way."

"Wait until daylight appears, Hattie," said her sister, in a burst of anticipation: "I know that after we have inspected this bottom-timber, and taken a long gallop about the country, these phantoms will disappear. Don't you think so, Mr. Young?"

"Ef I mought be 'lowed ter 'spress my 'pinion, hit'll be in a decided 'squar'-up style," answered Old Rocky, as he touched the rim of his greasy sombrero, "which air that no weemin folks order ride or walk outside ther bend until I hev tuck a peep at all p'int for mogasin tracks."

"No, girls," added Colonel Somers, "it is my desire that you stay by mother, and not leave camp at all until we have inspected the country hereabouts, and then you must not think of going without an escort. We will take you with us before many days on a long ride. There are many wild beasts here, if not Indians; and now, my dears, you had better retire in the wagon as usual. We shall have a house up, and be in something like home-style soon."

With a kiss for their uncle, and a pleasant good-night for him and the old scout, the beauties of the camp tripped over the virgin sward toward the wagons, where they joined the Colonel's wife and Aunt Martha, her sister, a maiden lady of some forty summers.

"Curn'l," exclaimed Old Rocky, "I has allers be'n back'ard 'bout 'sociatin' with caliker-kivered humans of ther feminine gender, as ther skollers calls ther weemin folks, but since I has be'n with this outfit I hes felt more ter hum nor I ever 'spected I would; an' ther more I peeps at 'em, an' ther more I hears 'em talk, ther wuss I feels 'bout ther cussed reds a-glidin' in on us. Ef it warn't for that I should skate out on a big bufler-hunt; but I sees yer eyelids is a-gittin' floppy, an' hit's about time ter roll in under the blankets. I's doggoned glad yer has opened yer mind to Old Rocky. He are yer pard from this out, ter hunt up that little flower w'at yer lost, an' loves as well until yit. Now yer has tole me, ef we duzn't fin' her I hopes ter eat bugs ther rest of my life; that is, ef she are a-livin', an' I kinder has hopes, though I can't see whar they comes from jess yit. Shake! Yer'll sleep easier, I knows, for 'lievin' yer mind."

"Good-night, friend Young. I thank you much for your kind sympathy, and will speak again with you upon this subject very soon. Good-night."

CHAPTER IX. GLEAMS OF LIGHT.

THE camp in the horse-shoe bend of the Rio Brazos was a busy scene the next day, after the arrival of the train, and the conversation already recorded.

The natural clearing in the middle of the bend was covered with luxuriant grass, and here the wagons, half a dozen in number, were drawn up in a circle, within which were the camp-fires.

Seven sturdy Texans and a Mexican named Antonio had been secured by the colonel to accompany him as teamsters and herders; two of these, with three negroes, being on the back trail with the stock.

The teamsters were all men with small families, which they had brought with them, with the intention of settling and forming a colony. They were to receive from Colonel Somers regular wages for all the time put in as workmen for him; in building his house, fencing, and putting in a crop of corn and wheat. After the colonel's ranch should be finished they were to work together and erect a cabin for each of their number, which would make quite a respectable little settlement.

Within the circle of wagons the women were busy about the fires, preparing food, while a bevy of children of tender age played about beneath the shade of the bottom timber. After a hearty breakfast of venison and corn-pone and coffee, the former having been brought in early in the morning by Old Rocky, the men went up the stream, and soon for the first time the virgin forest echoed with the cheering sound of the great civilizer, the ax. The huge tapering oaks of the bottom tottered and fell crashing on all sides, were trimmed clear of branches, measured, and notched, ready for the oxen to haul to the site of the proposed home of Colonel Somers.

Mrs. Somers and Aunt Martha, woman-like, occupied their time in overlocking and unpacking the household wardrobes; while Hattie and Mamie were gliding here and there, singing as they gathered the rare and fragrant flowers, and at times stopping in pleasure to listen to the warbling of the many birds.

Ernest Somers, the colonel's adopted son, superintended the felling of the trees, the selection of logs and their measurement. He was a youth of rather slender frame, but possessing cool nerves and sinews of steel. His features were small, regular and dark. Graceful mustache and imperial ornamented lip and chin,

while the long wavy hair which hung low over his shoulders gave him somewhat a dandyish air, when compared with those with whom he associated. The men were all dressed in buckskin, but Earnest wore a costume that was trimmed and embroidered; while the belt at his waist held a huge bowie knife and revolver.

Old Rocky had surprised himself by accepting the invitation of the colonel to partake of his breakfast in company with himself and the ladies; and the younger members of the household enjoyed not a little the unmistakable sheep's eyes cast by the old scout in the direction of their aunt. Indeed the members of the party had all been surprised of late at the changed appearance of Aunt Martha, who had begun primping and be-ribboning herself in a manner that was quite unusual.

This fact, coupled with the attention and deference she paid to the hashed English in which Old Rocky detailed his various adventures, highly amused the girls, and even at times caused a smile to break through the settled clouds of sorrow on the faces of the colonel and his wife. Perhaps these little peculiarities between the old scout and the maiden lady would not have attracted so much notice, had not the former upon engaging to act as advance scout stipulated that he should leave the company when they reached their destination; but now by his conversation he showed that not only was he in no haste to depart, but that he intended to adhere to them through thick and thin.

As soon as Col. Somers had seen that everything was progressing as well as he could wish under the direction of Ernest, he shouldered his rifle, and in company with the old scout started out from the bend to make a circuit around their point of settlement, and inspect the country more thoroughly than he had done in his previous visit when he had passed down the Brazos.

"I hes done a heap o' thinkin' durin' ther night, curn'l," said Old Rocky, as they got clear of the camp, "bout what ye were a-tellin' me, an' I'd like ter ax ye a few question 'gardin' of ther matter."

"Well, Mr. Young, I am glad to know you have been so good as to meditate over my troubles. The more we talk of them the better we will understand each other, and perhaps you may see a way to lighten them. Proceed then, my friend: we may study up some way that may alleviate my great grief."

"Yer mentioned that yer were pretty sartin that Dark Dashwood knowed 'bout whar ye were mostly, an' which way yer trails p'inted."

"I have been led by past events, Mr. Young, to think that such is the case."

"Has yer ever had any idee who hes be'n round yer that hes played ther spy?"

"No! that has been a mystery to me. I have always trusted and believed that all who have been in my employ were honest men."

"Whar did yer pick up that Greaser bull-whacker?"

"He came to me at San Antonio, and asked to be employed."

"An' yer knows Dark Dashwood ter be pard with ther wust Greasers on ther Brazos. Hasn't it struck yer he mought a sent this yellor-belly a purpos' ter spy on yer? He hes ther cut of a fust-class stick-yer-in-ther-back, in my way o' thinkin', an' I wouldn't trust him ter skin a goat."

"I haven't taken much notice of the fellow, but I don't think he would dare play the traitor when he is with so many Texans. He must know that upon any proof of such perfidy, his life would pay the forfeit."

"I tells yer, curn'l, yer dozn't notice nuthin'; yer too danged easy, an' hit wouldn't take a very cranky chap ter pull the wool over yer eyes; that's why I hate ter leave yer."

A significant smile played upon the colonel's features at the last remark, which was unnoticed by the scout.

"Yer takes yer trouble too much ter heart ter git along in everyday life as yer orter. Yer has ter keep yer peepers on ther buzz, an' ther bugs out'n yer ears all ther time, b'arin' in mind that yer has weemin dependin' on yer. Now ef it warn't fer that Greaser I had a plan fer yer what, with me 'long, mought cl'ar off some ef not all of yer sorrep."

"What do you mean, my friend?" demanded Col. Somers in an excited tone, as he brought the butt of his rifle to the ground and came to a sudden halt.

"I mean that I knows whar ther air a white gal 'mong ther reds what's 'bout ther age o' yourn."

"Where?" demanded the colonel, trembling in every limb, as he grasped the arm of the scout, his voice full of intense excitement. "Where? And why have you not spoken of it before?"

"Easy, curn'l; I kin talk without bein' pinched like a new-fangled doll. Keep cool. Why I hasn't spit this thing out afore are thet I hasn't wanted ter hev yer a goin' jist a-bilin' off on a wild-goose chase. I don't reckon ther gal I fers ter air yourn, but thar'd be no harm in our goin' ter see. I tells yer fust off, hit air a dang'd long way to'ard ther sunset."

"I don't care if it is beyond the Pacific," said the colonel.

"Wa'al, curn'l, this yer gal I's thinkin' 'bout air way up in ther 'Pache mountains, an' ef a hundred men went fer her they wouldn't mount ter shucks, an' they mought all lose ther ha'r. Yer see, nuthin' 'cept close scoutin' an' stealin' her on ther sly kin be did; an' es I said, two kin stan' a better show nor a reg'mint."

"Have you ever seen this young girl?"

"See'd her? I reckon I hes, but hit war a long ways off. I war a-peepin' round a rock, an' she war prancin' a pony on ther jump, 'way down under me in ther valley which was es thick with 'Paches es a dog town air with snakes."

"But—"

"Now, jist hold yer hosses," interrupted Rocky; "yer is ready ter stampede on ther jump, git corraled, an' turn up without yer ha'r. I'm a-runnin' this biz myself, an' ef yer doesn't simmer down inter calm reasonin' yer'll never see the gal nobows. We hes got this ter b'ar in mind, Hyer's ther weemin; ef ther hain't no sign o' reds about, we kin make that Greaser slide out'n this for he bothers me. I wouldn't feel easy ter leave him hyer. Yer got boys enough ter take keer on the weemin folks a'ter this ranch are up snug, an' ef a few reds should run in on 'em, they could find theirselves abind ther logs, I reckon. Think jist es much es yer wants ter, curn'l, but don't sling gab. Don't say a word 'bout our goin' till I mentions it myself. Hit's a big job. Nobody knows how big till they finds out."

Colonel Somers grasped the scout's hand, and looking into his eyes felt that it was impossible for Old Rocky to have given him any hope without good grounds for doing so. He then shouldered his rifle and followed him in silence, but with a step far lighter than before, and an eye brightened by a hope which almost seemed sure of realization.

Bewildered by a thousand thoughts and surmises, trying in vain to picture his child as she must be after so many years of captivity among the savage Apaches, Colonel Somers followed on after the old scout, who scrutinized every foot of ground around the bend, till at last they arrived at the camp, having detected no signs of any trail of marauding war-parties.

CHAPTER X.

A LODGE IN SOME VAST WILDERNESS.

THREE weeks had greatly changed the appearance of things at the Bend on the Brazos.

A large log house, with a wide veranda stood on the western side of the opening, and five smaller cabins were ranged in a row between it and the huge corral which stood as first proposed by Col. Somers on the neck of the bend. All along the bank, next to the little settlement, the smaller trees had been felled, and their thick branches hanging toward the water made a rough, but strong and very difficult abatis to penetrate.

The herders and negroes had arrived with the stock, which had been driven out on the plain each morning to graze, and at night corraled. These members of the company erected their cabins back of the corral, and near its outside entrance, to guard against any surprise from the only point from which danger was to be apprehended.

The Mexican, Antonio, had through the advice of Old Rocky, been sent away; Colonel Somers giving him a month's extra wages, and parting with him on the most friendly terms.

Mrs. Somers, Aunt Martha, and the two girls had fitted up the new house so that it had indeed a homelike appearance.

"Everything air straight an' squar' an' plumb inside ther bend, curn'l," said the scout, as the two men sat upon the edge of the veranda smoking, after the finishing touch had been put to their work by hanging the heavy outer gate of the corral.

"Yes, Mr. Young, I am happy to say that everything is trim and safe, besides being handy, in our little settlement; but it has taken much labor to build the corral, my house, and the cabins. I think I have been very lucky in my selection of men. They have worked nobly, and through your skill with the rifle we have had a full larder without being obliged to slaughter any beeves. I do not see how we could have got along without you, and rejoice that you decided to prolong your stay with us."

"Yer jist puts me in mind of our futur' trip to'ard ther 'Pache country, what I hasn't felt like talkin' 'bout ontel I see'd things was hunk 'bout ther bend; but now I don't see nothin' ter hinder us two takin' a run to'ards the sunset."

"You really think we can leave the women safely, Mr. Young? You cannot conceive how much I have wished to speak with you of this trip. I have dreamed of my lost darling by day and night for many years, and since you gave me such a ray of hope I have felt that I might indeed see her again. I have not thought best to speak on this subject to my wife. All that it will be necessary to explain to her, is that we are going to ascertain if any captives of her age and sex are held by the Apaches, and that we expect to get information from the

frontier forts to the West. She will not be so sadly disappointed, should our search prove to be a fruitless one, as if we had given her flattering hopes which, I am sorry to say, if we do feel them, are built upon a sandy and insecure foundation."

"Yer jest keerect, curn'l. 'Twon't do ter 'spect much; an' weemin is flighty about sich biz. Ther Greaser hev h'isted hisself out'n ther diggin's, an' thet's favor'ble. Ef thet puser-lanimus an' cavortin' cuss of a Dashwood don't glido this a-ways, I hardly think ther reds 'll happen ter strike hyerabouts, es they mostly passes south o' Phantom Hill an' Curmanche Peak, an' ther 'Paches ain't apt ter make a trail north o' ther Colorado 'thout they hes some pertickler biz laid out aforehand, for they's somewhat skeery 'bout meetin' ther Curmanches what goes for 'Pache ha'r every time."

"I have thought of these things," replied the colonel; "and when I first discovered this place, reasoned as you have in regard to its being somewhat removed from the general track of Indian war-parties; and if this night passes without the regular visit of my most revengeful enemy, Dark Dashwood, I shall feel doubly secure."

"I don't reckon the cuss'll find this snug nest, curn'l. Ef he does, I'll sw'ar he's got ther devil on his side sure enough; an' he's bein' alive a'ter so many a-buntin' for a squar' shot at him shows purty cl'ar that he's a pard o' his."

A bright moon now lit up the scene about them, showing each angle of cabin and corral, and even the smaller branches of the trees to the eastward; but black clouds went rushing over the heavens at times, passing between the earth and the luminary of night, making it darker by contrast than it really was.

As Old Rocky uttered the last remark, in regard to his Satanic Majesty, the wild, long-drawn shriek of a panther rung through the bottom timber, followed by the scream of a woman as if in the most abject terror.

Now Old Rocky had observed Aunt Martha passing from the house to the river with a bucket, just previous to the alarm, and grasping his rifle he dashed toward the spring on the river bank as though his life depended upon his speed, Colonel Somers following, and the other members of the little colony all rushing from their dwellings, puzzled as well as greatly alarmed.

As the old scout reached the timber the first sight showed him Aunt Martha standing at the spring, and paralyzed with fear. Following the direction of her horrified gaze, he saw an immense panther lying along the limb of a tree that leaned over the water from the opposite bank. The huge beast was tearing the bark with his claws, his back drawn up and his tail lashing, showing that he was preparing to spring upon his prey, which he doubtless would have done had the woman attempted to retreat toward the cabin.

Luckily the moon was unclouded, and the beast was to the east of the scout; so, bringing his rifle quickly to his shoulder, and glancing along the sights, he fired, just as the animal sprang from his high perch over the water, and toward the bank where Aunt Martha was standing.

The latter stood like a statue, frozen in her tracks as it were with horror, until the report of the rifle broke the terrible spell that bound her. She then turned to fly, as the huge beast, with a bullet in his breast, came crashing through branch and bush, landing prone upon the earth at her very feet, its fore claws clutching the skirt of her robe, tearing it from her waist, and in the dying agony drawing her from her feet and down the bank.

Dropping the rifle and drawing his bowie, an instant after he had pulled the trigger, Old Rocky bounded down the bank and sprang between the now senseless woman and the struggling panther. Slashing the skirt of Aunt Martha with his knife free from the clutch of the claws that were fast drawing into a death embrace, the woman was free once more and saved. Thrown entirely out of his usual caution by the danger of one who, he now knew, held a warm corner in his heart, the old scout threw himself into the grasp of the wounded beast that was gnashing its jaws and clawing the ground in agony. Quick flashed the bright steel, and was buried again and again in the side of the panther, which, in the last struggles, tore the strong buckskin hunting-shirt to shreds, while its claws each left a mark in his flesh.

When Colonel Somers, Ernest and the herders reached the scene, they found Aunt Martha senseless, her clothing torn and covered with the blood of her fierce assailant. Fearing that she was badly injured, they bore her to the ranch, and gave her over to the care of Mrs. Somers and the younger women, who were horrified at the sad and unexpected occurrence, but soon rejoiced to find that no real injuries had been inflicted.

CHAPTER XI.

MORE BRUTE THAN HUMAN.

WHEN Ernest and Colonel Somers returned to the bottom they found the herders gathered

about the dead panther, while Old Rocky, looking much the worse for the conflict, stood on the bank reloading his rifle.

"Ya-as," said the old scout, in answer to many inquiries, "ther bark-t'arer war jist bound ter fall in love with Aunt Marthy, which yer kin bet I's ag'in' strongly from the fust, an—"

At this Old Rocky was interrupted by a general laugh from the herders, that brought him to an abrupt stop. Realizing that he had spoken in an unconscious way what he would not have had pass his lips for worlds, he knew that any explanation of a different character from that which they were so quick to infer would only plunge him into deeper perplexity.

His face flushed, and the arrival of the colonel with Ernest embarrassed the old man to such an extent that he had no further remarks to make.

The facts, however, were plain before them, and with much anxiety and regret that their good friend had received such rough treatment, each vied with the other in assisting to dress his wounds and to procure him another hunting-shirt, after which he again took up his position on the veranda, intending to resume the conversation, notwithstanding the sharp sensations caused by the claws of his late antagonist.

"It was a very lucky escape for Aunt Martha," said the colonel; "but you are never surprised, and seem always ready to meet the danger. I sincerely hope that your wounds will not long continue to pain you; and I have little doubt that Aunt Martha's salve, which, by the way, she made with her own hands, will effect a speedy cure."

"I hasn't ther leastest doubt about it," answered Old Rocky, as he cast a sidelong, suspicious look at the colonel, as if he thought the latter had put a little too much emphasis on his last words. However, the same far-away expression rested upon his friend's face, and the old scout, satisfied that no undercurrent was incorporated in his words, continued:

"My meat heals up suddint-like. I doesn't pizen myself with bug-juice, even when hit's handy. Tain't ther fust time a painter has folded me in his lovin' embrace, an' tried ter make shoe-strings out'n my hide. Fact are, I doesn't 'member if I ever got a hug from ennythin' outside one o' them fellers, 'thout hit were a b'ar or a red. They all gits 'fectionate as they's leavin' the world, an' freezes onter ennythin' that's handy for a good-by hug."

"Everything 'bout ther settlement seems ter be quiet. Hit must be nigh on ter midnight," he continued, long after every one but Colonel Somers and himself had retired, as he looked up toward the sky. "That's a good Injun moon, colonel, an' ther red ha'r-snatchers 'll be jist a b'ilin' round ther Medina and Colorado this nex' month, if they doesn't come furdur north. She's in ther fust quarter, an' for a leetle thing hit spreads out a heap o' light over some consid'able surface, but thar's another cloud about ter take the shine out'n her, an' we'd better—"

Here he was interrupted by a wild, taunting yell, followed by a rifle-shot, the bullet, with a zip, penetrating the oak support to the veranda not six inches from the colonel's head, the brittle bark flying into the faces of both men. Springing instantly behind two of the oaken posts, the colonel exclaimed, in mingled astonishment, alarm and hatred:

"Dark Dashwood, by Heavens!"

If the hate that seemed concentrated in these words, as they issued from between grinding teeth, could have been estimated by him who fired the shot, despite his reckless character, he would have shuddered with fear and apprehension.

With their rifles grasped tightly, both men gazed up to the opposite bank of the river, which was full twenty feet higher than the bend, and of a rocky nature. They had not seen the flash, but located the shot from the sound as near a large boulder that rose some five feet higher than the bank, and upon this rock they could distinguish something that resembled a human form, the shade of the bottom timber somewhat screening a clear view.

"Oh-h-h, yes; Colonel Somers! How-de-do? How d'ye brace up? I sent that shot for your ear, and somebody must have cut it off, or I'd have hit it sure and certain. I've come to make my usual call without invitation, and have just sent in my card. Reckon it will set you back some to realize that I've struck your locate. But I'm on your trail. I, Dark Dashwood, the Black Wolf of the Prairies. I hear you've adopted two more daughters, and they're beauties. Trot them out. Your first was a little angel. She is now the squaw of an Apache, and brings his wood and water. Who says that Dark Dashwood ever forgets his revenge? I've sworn your gray hairs shall go down in sorrow to the grave, and I'll not forget my oath until they shut off my breath. I'm a-going to show myself, according to an unsolicited promise; and if you shoot at me, forty rifles shall pour lead into your ranch."

Trembling with suppressed passion, the colonel listened to the taunts of the human fiend, who had hauled a mountain of grief upon his head, and rent his heart in agony.

Old Rocky fairly danced with rage, knowing

they could not get a fair sight of the outlaw, and even were that possible, his deadly threat kept each finger from the trigger.

Ernest Somers now appeared upon the veranda, rifle in hand, having quieted the women, who had been awakened by the shot, and cautioned the herders to keep cover until further instructions.

A hoarse whisper from his uncle, and Ernest took a sheltered position just as a high blaze of fire sprung up behind the rock on the opposite bank, and, outlined against it, was the form of Dark Dashwood, the fancy ornamentation of his Mexican costume and arms flashing in the fire-light. Swinging his sombrero for a moment, he yelled:

"Viva, Diabolo Dashwood! King of the Prairies, King of the Mountains and Master of his Enemies! Old Somers, lock your gals up tight, for I'm tiring of the senoritas of Mexico. I'm as eager for revenge as a hungry panther for food. Henceforth your dreams shall be of me day and night. You may expect my yell and shot, but not to kill you. Oh, no! I love my revenge too well. Your little angel daughter—"

Human nature could bear no more. The three rifles were brought to shoulder, and their loud reports followed and rung out as one as the flash of the firelight upon the barrels warned the outlaw, who sprung from the rock just as the balls cut the air where he had stood.

A loud, taunting yell came from over the river, then, to the astonishment and horror of those upon the veranda, the air became filled with agonizing screams and pleadings, and exclamations, while high up over the boulder on which Dark Dashwood had stood, clearly outlined against the firelight, appeared a human form, head downward, slowly, by jerks, was it drawn up, and the faint lines showed that a lariat was attached to each ankle, and running up over the limbs of trees standing apart from each other, torturing the wretched victim as each pull upon the rope stretched his body further from the trees.

The hands were not bound, and the fearful contortions of arms and body endeavoring to gain an upright position, added to his shrieks and yells, were horrible in the extreme. No other form was visible. The dangling human being was now stationary in the air, the ropes having evidently been secured to the man now hanging limp from weakness and agony.

"Who was it?" "Who could it be?" "What was to be done?" These were the hurried questions that they asked, one of another.

It was evident, whoever the luckless being was, that he was naked; and that he was faced from the river and settlement, and had no knowledge of his whereabouts.

"Ther infernal cusses has glided off, I reckon," broke from Old Rocky, "an' lef' this poor feller, whoever he be'es."

"How do you know that, Young?" asked the colonel quickly, as he wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow; "if such be the case we must relieve the man instantly, or be guilty of his death."

"I knows, or s'pects, by ther despa'rin' yell he gi'n now," answered the scout; "but they may only 'a' drawed off, an' hung him up a-purpos ter get a shot at them what cuts him down. Hit are a tough case ter deal with."

The women, greatly alarmed at the confusion, huddled together in the house, the herders' wives and children included, the herders themselves being at their posts about the corral.

As Old Rocky answered the colonel another outcry was heard from the corral, which drew attention to that quarter, and soon a negro woman came rushing and screaming wildly. Falling at the feet of Col. Somers, she broke out, between shriek and sob:

"Marse Somers, what yer done wid my man, Jim? Oh, God lamity, tell Susy whar's Jim!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE RESCUE.

THIS was sufficient. All present now knew that the form suspended in the air in so torturing a position, was one of the colonel's negroes.

Old Rocky passed his rifle to Col. Somers, tore off his hunting-shirt and sombrero, and then, before any one could speak a word of remonstrance, sprung over the intervening grass-plot and disappeared amid the shadows of the timber.

All eyes now eagerly watched the swaying form above, which now and then gave out but feeble moans, while the poor negro woman, blinded by tears and too full of her grief to observe what attracted the attention of the assembled household, rolled upon the sward, no one caring to inform her in what a fearful position her husband was.

Suddenly the anxious watchers saw one of the ropes give way and the body swing down behind the trunk of one of the trees, to the branches of which the remaining rope had been secured.

Then the form of the negro was seen to lower slowly and disappear amid the foliage. All was still. No shot broke the air, to send a chill to those anxious waiting hearts. The moments

seemed hours, but at last the old scout came slowly from the river, dripping with water.

"Is Jim dead?" eagerly and anxiously inquired the colonel.

"He aire purty stiff an' sore, folkses, but I reckon he'll be able ter swim over, come sun-up. Dead bless yer, Susy," said the scout, as he raised the negress from the ground; "go back ter bed, ole woman. Jim air all right. He air a-watchin' a coon-tree over ther river."

"Now, you's done dead sure an' sartin o' that, Marse Rocky!" exclaimed the wench, hastily wiping her eyes, and suddenly discovering that she was not in full dress.

"Sure an' sartin, gal! Jist see'd him."

"De Lor' bress ye, marse, for 'ievin' Susy's heart! I done woked up an' foun' he were gone. Hopes I ain't 'sturbed ye's all."

And, still somewhat suspicious, remembering that it was an unusual hour for the men to be all about, she started off, but a call from Mrs. Somers caused her to enter the house, and ended all controversy on her part.

When the negro woman had taken herself out of the way, all the men gathered around Old Rocky, who related his interview with Jim.

"I cut him down," explained the scout, as he wrung the water from portions of his clothing, "an' found he were kinder crazy, an' his shins was purty badly skinned by ther ropes; 'sides he couldn't stand, ter save hisself. I dragged him down ther bank ter a cozy hole in ther rocks, an' sloshed some water onter him, which brung him roun' ter biz suddint like. He 'splained things this a-way. Thet he were jerked out'n his bed, an' a heap o' rags stuffed inter his bacon-trap, an' tuk off he didn't know whar, but he done thought he were a gone coon. Thar warn't mo' nor half-a-dozen men with Dashwood, an' that 'counts for ther levantin'. Jim are so bad skeered, 'sides bein' hurted consid'ble, he can't glide over this a-ways ter-night, an' I reckon he are likely ter see more spooks nor he ever did afore."

The colonel seated himself once more upon the veranda, utterly discouraged, prostrated with thoughts of future danger to himself and his dear ones. His supposed secure retreat had been discovered by the fiend who had made more sorrow for him and his than all the world besides; and who, probably, was now planning to heap still further grief upon him. He feared Dark Dashwood, as indeed well he might, far more than he did the savage tribes of the llanos. With these harrowing thoughts filling his mind, imagining every ill that could possibly befall him, he buried his face in his hands and wept like a child, but Ernest and Old Rocky, by gentle words and entreaties, prevailed upon him to retire, as no further danger was to be apprehended for the present, and they had determined to constitute themselves a volunteer guard for the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

DARK COUNCILS.

A HUGE, gnarled and scraggy tree, its branches wrenched partly away by fierce northerners, the bark soaked by rains and scorched by sun for years after the life-giving sap had ceased flowing, has dropped and either mingled with the earth or afforded for the marauding savages kindling-fuel for their camp-fires. Many a war-party has bivouacked beneath these dark, gnarled branches, as the black circular spots here and there, amid the grass, testify; some of them, very small, showing upon examination that long years have passed since a bed of coals occupied the space where the rank grass is slowly regaining its ground.

A trail passes, north and south, near the tree, and some fifty paces from it; this trail having been made by Government wagons. But it is only at points where the wheels have slid or jumped from some obstruction that the black earth shows itself.

This trail runs into the old St. Louis and Santa Fe road at Fort Belknap, and was used for the purpose of carrying supplies to the latter station, previous to its being abandoned by the Government as a military post.

But to return to the tree—the most noticeable feature in this wild wood scene.

We observe, as we have recorded, that the bark and branches are torn and worn away, the former entirely, the latter partly; here and there throwing out rough, gnarled, broken arms, as if calling the attention of the passer-by to its deplorable condition. Trunk and branches are bleached nearly white, and all are nearly as hard as iron.

But there is that upon the trunk of this tree which would immediately chain the attention of the traveler, and awaken curiosity; for it is literally covered with Indian hieroglyphics and hundreds of figures, all done in vermilion—the figures representing the various positions, arms, and movements of war and the chase, in rough, uncouth Indian characters.

The chief, warrior, squaw and pappoose; the horse, buffalo, deer, elk, antelope, and various other animals are each plainly delineated; also, arrows marking the courses to be taken by war-parties to join others which have passed this point. There are also strange objects, and

marks which are only understood by the red-men, or by such scouts as are well versed in their ways.

This is a great meeting-place for the savage tribes. Many trails have pointed toward and away from it, and I have described the oak which gave its name to the whole country around it.

By looking on the map of Texas, and placing your finger in the center of Palo Pinto County, the digit will be covering the spot where this oak stood twenty years ago—in fact, the very tree, with its strange ornamentation, is Palo Pinto, a Spanish name, signifying Painted Tree.

It was the first night following the visit of Dark Dashwood to the Somers settlement, that just after sunset, this outlaw, together with half-a-dozen followers as desperate and revengeful almost as himself, rode up the trail from the south to the clear place near the Painted Tree.

The manner in which these men dismounted, and rubbed their limbs, showed that they had been long in the saddle, and were greatly fatigued.

Among the number was Antonio, the Mexican, who had been but recently discharged from the employ of Colonel Somers.

Dark Dashwood, unlike the others, loosened the buckskin loop which held his coiled lariat to the horn of his saddle, sprung lightly to the ground, and allowing the coils to glide through his hand, walked quickly to the foot of the ghostly-looking tree, and eagerly scanning the characters on its trunk, passed entirely around it.

"Caramba! Curse the luck!"

This ejaculation proceeded from the outlaw chief, as he threw his sombrero to the earth in vexation, and running his fingers through his long hair, for a moment, became lost in thought; his brows knit, and his features distorted by an angry scowl.

Dark Dashwood would have been called a magnificent-looking man, by any woman, were it not for his treacherous eyes which were black and snaky. He was tall and well-formed, and his Mexican costume added greatly to his striking appearance. There was a dashing, dare-devil style of speech and action, peculiar to the frontier, but which in him was greatly exaggerated. A nervous twitching of the eye and head in all directions gave him the air of one who had often been hunted, and who was constantly expecting danger of a dread nature.

He stood but a moment in deep perplexity, for he was a man of quick thought and action; then he sunk to his knees at the foot of the tree, brushed his hand over a clear, unpainted space, and tore away the long grass that was next the trunk.

"Antonio! toss me my saddle-bags, will you? Jim-Jams, strike a light and start a fire. Billyum, you ride up the trail to the north, and ascertain if there's any kind of an outfit about this section besides We, Us & Co."

His orders were promptly obeyed, and Dashwood fumbled amid his saddle-bags, soon producing an Indian paint-bag which he carefully deposited upon the grass, and then turned his head toward his followers.

"Boys, I reckon you'd better slip your gear, for we'll be forced to camp here to-night. The horses need rest, and I'm mighty sure we're all pretty much in the same fix. I had some hopes that Lone Wolf had passed down the country. This is his time of the year to get his mad up, and when he does he generally strikes well north on the Comanche trails, for he's full of fight, and don't mind much what or who he runs against. If he does come this way, I'll leave plain talk here for him; and if he don't make things hot for Somers's settlement, I'm the boss liar of Texas!"

"Why you no killee dam ole cuss, las' night?" asked Antonio, as he came from picketing the horses, and overheard his chief's last remark.

"Well, Antonio, I suppose that it did look strange to you; but I play a fine game myself and know just what every card is worth before I sling it on the board. I saw at a glance we were not strong enough to do anything, the way they had got things fixed on the bend; but I couldn't leave without doing something to make Somers fret and worry. That's the reason I strung up the nigger. They'll be in a stew now until the pot turns over entirely into the fire. I wanted to show them we could glide into their outfit, without causing an alarm. Somers, nor none of his crowd, will be able to sleep easy for some time to come; and then they'll begin to get careless again, just in the wrong time for them. That settlement, and all that's in it, is doomed, and, if you'll watch me, I'll show you how I'll mortgage the whole caboodle. Here, I paint an arrow, pointing south-east; but I only place it there in case my other instructions are not found.

Crossing that arrow I paint another, pointing down to the ground. That means, look below. In one of the triangular spaces, formed by the crossed arrows, I paint a large D; in another, the same letter. Lone Wolf knows that those characters mean, Dark Dashwood. Now, you see, I take a piece of paper and I make the north star; an arrow pointing south-east by

that star, as on the tree. Next to the point of the arrow I paint nine marks on the under side. Next the feather of the shaft I make nineteen marks; and these tell Lone Wolf that there are nine fighting men, and nineteen women and children.

Now for the distance. He must know that I make a crescent moon to stand for a week. I divide it into seven portions; and then, putting the mark of a horse's hoof-prints underneath, show him that he can reach it in one day on horseback. Ain't that plain talk, boys, to a man who can't read?

"Bueno!" said Antonio, with satisfaction.

"Well, my celebrated chickens, it's all Injun except my two D's; and every character you see is as full of talk as John Armstrong when he's bilin' over with plaza poison. We will, now that this little job is done, take some refreshments and a snooze, and then strike out. Antonio, how long a time will it take you to ride to Santa Ana's Peak?"

"Tres dias, senor."

"Good! You know our old cave there? Lone Wolf knows its locate, and will stop when he goes down the country. If he has passed, you'll find a war arrow at the right of the entrance, the point stained red. If he has not, I'll give you some talk for him, to leave in the same place. Start early in the morning, and make good time there and return. You will in six days find us either here, or at the old place on the Brazos. How do you like the job?"

"Bueno," answered Antonio, laconically, with a shrug of his shoulders and an expression on his face that denoted he would rather that some one else would make the trip, although he knew it was useless to object to the orders of his chief.

A low whistle now brought Billyum from up the trail, and all partook of a rude meal; afterward changing their horses to a spot amid the oaks where the outlaws slept until morning, when Antonio, with the paper on which were marked directions to Palo Pinto for Lone Wolf, departed for Santa Ana's Peak; Dashwood and gang starting for the Brazos.

CHAPTER XIV.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

THE fables of mythology would appear more reasonable to one who inspected the mountainous retreat of the Apaches under Lone Wolf.

His imagination could readily conceive that near these huge mounds of scoria were forged the thunderbolts of Jove; that the huge masses and towering pillars of fire-eaten lava were cast aside by Titan smiths from Titanic furnaces.

The yawning abyss, the towering peak appear to have passed through the fires of Hades; and only the bright and variegated valley below, relieved from the dread awe which the barren heights, that in places seem to be toppling over upon you, inspire.

But even the valley now appears to be but a gateway to the infernal regions, which it needs no stretch of the imagination to locate within the bowels of the mountains; for, out from the white lodges, spring forms as hellish as ever were pictured to a disordered brain.

A hundred wild Apache warriors, in all their hideous war-paint, bedizened with feathers and frightful portions of terrible beasts, go circling around and around a blood-stained post, in a spasmodic dance, uttering hoarse guttural chants, interspersed with yells and whoops appalling to the ear. Fast whirl the savage hordes; quickly the glittering scalping-knife hisses through the air, and hatchets fly, and hang quivering in the war-post.

For half-an-hour the valley rings with echoing unearthly yells; then all is silent, and the red fiends hasten hither and thither, preparing for the war-path, for to-morrow's sun must find them far toward the Rio Pecos.

The squaws are ordered to move camp. The skin-lodges, and all the many camp equipments are dragged to the south side of the valley, where a spur of the cliff incloses a space sufficient to screen all view of any lodges from prying eyes that may in the absence of the braves, happen into the valley.

A grove of gigantic cottonwood partly hides the entrance to this secure retreat from view, and beneath these flows a cool spring.

The Apache squaws, armed with their bows are deemed able to take care of themselves and papposes; and Child-of-the-Sun is supposed to be overlooked and shielded by a power far stronger than even the Apache nation.

By curse and kick and taunt, the poor uncomplaining squaws are urged on in their work by their savage lords, until not a vestige of the Apache camp or village remains in view; and long before the sun has arisen from its bath in the Atlantic a hundred braves, armed to the teeth, and mounted upon prancing, wild-eyed ponies dash out of the beautiful valley, and, leaving the mountains far behind them, bound over the prairies toward the Rio Pecos.

It was a week after Dark Dashwood encamped at Palo Pinto, during the night, as the moon shone brightly, that the warriors in full war-

paint dashed around the south side of Santa Ana's Peak, with Lone Wolf at their head. It was evident that they had rested, and grazed their animals upon reaching the Colorado River, after their long march over the arid plains between that stream and the Rio Pecos, as they seemed in good condition.

A wild, savage horde they were, as they came at full gallop, in a long snake-like line from among the scattering post-oaks, and halted at the eastern base of the peak.

Lone Wolf here gave a low, peculiar yell as a signal, at the same time gazing up the mountain side; but getting no response, he uttered a guttural grunt and swung himself from his saddle. Then, turning about, he addressed one of his warriors.

"Wild Horse will go up,"—pointing to the side of the mountain—"he will find a big hole in the rocks. The pale-face who makes war on his own tribe is not in his home. He has not answered the yell of Lone Wolf. Wild Horse will look for the white man's talk paper. Lone Wolf has taken his hand. He has said he would be a friend to the White Chief of many horses. Lone Wolf's tongue is not forked."

The Indian, addressed as Wild Horse, sprung up the steep side of the mountain, and soon returned with the paper in his hand which had been conveyed by Antonio from Palo Pinto, according to the order of Dark Dashwood, and upon which was traced the symbolic figures which referred the Chief to Palo Pinto for further particulars.

With a low cry of anger, he tore the paper into fragments, exclaiming:

"Does the Dare Devil think Apaches are squaws, that they go not on their own war-paths? The trail of Lone Wolf points not to the north. When his belt is heavy with scalps then he will turn to the Painted Tree!"

Then, swinging his rifle over his head, he yelled in a voice of rage and exultation:

"Come, warriors of the Pecos! Our trail points south, where the Texanos sleep in their houses of logs. Come! Our trail shall be marked with blood. Our war-cries shall be heard on the big waters!"

A low murmur of fierce hatred ran along the line of braves, as they went flying like avenging demons through the oaks toward the south.

Fort Mason, at the time at which I write, was a military post, garrisoned by a detachment of infantry—sixty men, rank and file. Around the barracks, for several miles, were ranches; and about a score of log houses, each with its cattle corral, were within sight; some of them scarce more than a pistol shot away. The rancheros, who had established themselves in this post-oak region, being so near the garrison, felt secure from Indian raids; or, if the red-men were known to be coming down the country, they would take their wives and children, and fly to the fort.

Two days have passed since the Apaches left Santa Ana's Peak. It is two hours before dawn, the moon just hovering above the horizon, casting the long shadow of the oaks over the low log cabins around Fort Mason, beneath the roofs of which slumbered those who had braved many hardships to reach this isolated region, and make for themselves a home far from former friends and associations. All is silent as death about the cabins, and the sentinels around the barracks make no sound as they tread the soft path on their lonely, and what they consider useless, watch.

About one mile from the fort, north, spread out in a long line, is the war-party of Lone Wolf, dismounted, and holding their horses by the jaw-straps.

There is no settler's cabin within view.

There are enough of the savages, each now grasping his bows and arrows, to sweep the settlement, even to the barracks.

Why do they not utter their wild war-whoop and charge through the oaks? Why? Because it would be contrary to their mode of warfare.

A score of braves are selected from the party by the chief, their horses being secured to trees, and on foot the detail glide through the oaks in every direction toward and about the fort, those remaining behind mounting their mustangs ready for the charge, whenever the war-whoop should break upon the air.

At the short, sharp bark, in imitation of a coyote—no unusual sound—all are to commence operations.

We will follow but one, as they have each to play the same game; but all are not as successful as he whose actions we are about to describe.

Stealing along at the rear of a corral, he follows its shadow until the gate in its front is within ten paces of his position; the cabin standing flush with the side of the corral, and not forty feet from the gate. The Indian is securely hidden behind the trunk of a post oak. Not two hundred yards away stand the barracks, and the sentinels walk unconscious of the lurking foe.

The signal at last breaks upon the air. At that instant the brave thrusts one of his arrows deep into the ham of a mustang that stands half-asleep by the pickets of the corral. With a loud snort of pain and fear the animal bursts away,

startling the other horses, and all scamper around the corral.

This is all that is needed. The noise alarms the ranchero, who comes hastily out from his cabin and approaches the gate. There is nothing to fear. A coyote has frightened the horses. With hasty steps he goes forward. Quickly bends the Indian bow until the feathered shaft nearly touches his cheek. A sudden twang and whizz, followed by a most heart-rending moan, and the ranchero sinks to the earth, the arrow through his heart.

The Apache, with a bound, gathers the hair of the Texan; his knife flashes in the moonlight, and with the reeking scalp in his hand he springs back to his place of concealment.

The wife of the murdered man, alarmed at his prolonged absence, hastens to the door of the cabin, and stepping out upon the sward, gazing toward the corral-gate, calls out:

"Henry!"

This, in an anxious tone, is the last word she is ever to utter.

Another deadly shaft cuts the air, and is buried in her breast. She falls backward, a corpse; her still, white face upturned in the moonlight.

At this instant a rifle-shot breaks upon the stillness of the night, followed by the yell of a white man. Another shot, and another; then the wild, blood-curdling war-whoop of the Apaches, followed by an appalling answer from those who were awaiting the signal.

Now, through the oaks, rings the cry of mingled agony and terror from women and children, and the shouts of men battling against demons who know no mercy.

The garrison is alarmed; the guard is called out; the long roll sounds to arms; and through the oaks, as the morning light streaks the east, come the mounted Apaches, thundering in a long scattered line, and sweeping everything before them. They ride within pistol-shot of the barracks, with insulting cries and gestures, going like the wind and cutting off all who would seek the shelter of the garrison. A volley from the fort cuts down a few of the red fiends; the others give chase to the fleeing women and children, leaning from their horses and clutching them by the hair as they fly frantically along.

Here and there a daring Texan stands grasping his rifle, fighting with set teeth and blazing eyes; soon he falls, pierced with arrows, and his scalp hangs to an Apache belt.

Through the scattering oaks gallop four-score of blood-maddened, fiendish braves, their exultant yells filling the morning air, the ground strewn with dead and mutilated men, women and children, while others, who have escaped the fearful butchery, fly through the woods toward the Llano river.

Squads of infantry march out to battle with a foe who have done their fearful work, and now gallop from view, gathering the horses from the corrals and stripping the cabins of everything valuable.

Fifteen minutes from the first alarm, and the Apaches are headed toward the north, leaving behind them a massacred settlement.

Forty infantry, with five days' rations, are dispatched in pursuit of double the number of Apaches, mounted upon mustangs, who will not draw rein for fifty miles; when, if the garrison had been held by cavalry, as it should have been, the red fiends would have been caught, and would have received their just deserts.

CHAPTER XV.

"AND FLESH AND BLOOD SO CHEAP."

ON the banks of the Llano, just to the south of the trail that leads to Fort Mason, are a company of Texan Rangers.

The position of a dozen camp-fires is seen only by a lurid glow, for the hour is early morning, and upon the ground are still lying the blanketed forms of fifty men, while a dozen more occupy positions encircling the camp as guard.

The horses are all secured to trees inside the camp, for the Rangers have been detained at this point for forty-eight hours, and the animals have been grazed during the day on the prairie. The reason for this detention is obvious to the ear as well as to the eye, for the river is a boiling, seething torrent, overrunning its banks, and carrying upon its surface huge trees, torn up by the roots by the rushing waters; and yet, not one drop of rain has fallen at this point, the storm having raged far up toward the source of the stream.

The sentinels who are on the last watch gaze at the gray streaks of coming day, and at times inspect the river to see if there are any indications of the waters lowering to allow them to cross; all being anxious to continue their route further up country.

Suddenly, near one of the fires next to the river a Ranger sits up, shakes himself clear of his blanket and reaches over to his next neighbor, slapping him on the shoulder, and exclaiming:

"Wake up, Ben, an' let's see how the river appears. I've had enough of this camp, and want a fresh deal on scenery, if nothing else."

His companion, upon being thus awakened sprang to his feet, and both of them picked up and buckled on their belts.

"As to a change of deal," remarked the other, "I'm inclined to think a change of the lay-out would be putting it more to the point. There's nothing to win here, that's certain; and I'm willing to risk wet leggings rather than shuffle around here any longer. Come! I'm ready to take a look at the drink."

The two Rangers left camp and walked down to the brink of the stream.

Of medium height, slender, but full of fire and vim, are these two Texas boys; fine-spirited youths—for they were nothing but youths—as you would wish to see. They are brothers, and are known throughout the State as Fighting Ben and Daring Bill—the Fighting Thompsons.

"What's in the wind, my lords?" called out another Ranger, who now joined the brothers, habited and armed like themselves. He had long flaxen hair, and a merry twinkle in his eye, his face beaming with a continual smile, which caused him to be a favorite and the life of every party he might be with. This was Joseph G. Booth, or Reckless Joe, at this writing a resident of Terrell, Texas.

"There's nothing in the wind, Joe; but the devil is in the water," replied Ben. "Just because our game is up country, the river had to rise and bank our play. It hasn't fallen a foot in twelve hours; has it, Billy?"

"You're good at a guess, Ben, if you ain't a Yankee," replied his brother, who was leaning over the bank of the torrent, supporting himself by a sapling. "It isn't a half-inch over or under a foot. There's a slim chance for our getting out of this camp for forty-eight hours more."

"I tell you, me lords," said Joe, assuming a theatrical air and shaking his fist at the boiling waters, "I tell ye that me impatient spirit chafes within me corporosity. Talk not to me of lingering within the confines of the camp. You may be afraid of water, as you are not used to the liquid as a beverage, but for me—gaze within the limpid depths of me variegated optics; gaze upon me cheeks, glowing with the rose-tint of health; gaze upon me broad expansive brow of alabaster make-up, and see the effects of the pure nectar distilled in the cloudy heavens. I make no idle boast when I say, that before the sun—that oriental god of day—shall disappear in magnificence beneath the flowery prairies of the west, Joseph, mounted upon his noble steed Pinto, shall be seen plowing through these turbulent rapids, in all the glory of a conqueror."

"I'll bet four bits against a picayune," returned Ben, "that if you saw a gin cock-tail sitting over on the bank yonder, you'd not wait for Pinto, but run the chances on a death-gurgle, and stampede through the water you're spreading your English about, and go for it; but you'd land—that is, if you ever struck dirt again—about five miles down-stream."

"'Tis false! False as—well, a most condemned insinuation on me appetite," exclaimed Joe, in assumed anger. "Did the aforementioned cock-tail repose itself in the previously mentioned position, I would, with the utmost satisfaction, dip up a tin-cup full of water from the river at me feet, and in the liberality of me heart, and in appreciation of your present condition, exclaim: 'Ben, there's your cock-tail! Take it me noble friend; 'tis yours. Take it quickly from me sight, as it is most grievously tantalizing.'"

"Thank you, Joe," returned Ben, with a laugh; "I appreciate your liberality in advance."

"Hark!" interrupted Fighting Bill, springing higher up the bank, and looking and listening intently; his attention drawn over the river. "I heard a woman's scream, or I'm a Greaser!"

Joe and Ben bounded up the bank by the side of Bill, and all three stood with senses strained to catch any sound outside of that caused by the rushing waters.

They had but a moment to wait. A long wailing cry of terrible fear and despair from female lips rung out above the splash of the waters; then, a series of shrill screams from women and children greeted the ears of the listeners, who gave a loud yell that brought every Ranger to his feet, and all rushed quickly toward the bank.

Just at the ford on the opposite side of the river was a clear space, huge trees standing above and below, and into that space rushed a crowd of women and children, their clothing torn into rags from contact with the bushes, their hair flying, and their faces ghastly with horror! A few men followed, with rifles clutched tightly, their faces now turned in the direction that they had come, as if expecting deadly foes to follow.

At this instant Captain Edward Burleson of the Rangers sprang upon a fallen log and yelled:

"Oh—h—h, yes! What's up! Who's running you?"

Until this time the refugees had not noticed the Rangers' camp, and when Burleson's voice rung over the water, they sprang to their feet and spread their hands in a supplicating manner, while the air was filled with cries of joy.

One of the men ran forward, and shouted:

"Ther 'Paches has cleared ther ranches 'bout

Fort Mason! Our friends is nigh all killed and scalped! For God's sake swim ther river an' save ther women an' children!"

"Volunteers, forward!" yelled Burleson. "I want twenty-five men who can swim, and are not afraid to risk death in the river. It's a risky thing to ford the stream, but it's got to be done."

The captain was immediately surrounded by volunteers, and glancing around he quickly called off the twenty-five names, the writer of this narrative being one of the number.

"Saddle up, and scoot, boys! The remainder of us will soon join you."

The picked men sprang quickly for their steeds, those having the most hardy and fleet animals having been selected, and nimble fingers soon buckled the accouterments and prepared the ammunition and arms for the dangerous swim.

With carbines slung breech up, and revolvers about their necks, the Rangers spurred high up the river, and one by one plunged into the raging torrent; the mustangs snorting with fear, while the men who remained lashed them into the stream.

Anxiously were they watched by those on both sides of the river; as, breathing laboriously, their eyes glaring with terror, they plunged about in the mad waters, being at times whirled entirely about by the circling torrent.

A description of the many narrow escapes of both man and horse, in that swift rolling river, would be tedious. It is sufficient to state that, after herculean efforts, twenty men and horses stood dripping among the refugees on the opposite bank; while five were washed away down the river, having been unable to effect a landing.

It was but a moment that those who had succeeded in crossing sat upon their horses, and gazed at the wretched and terror-stricken group. Waving an adieu with their sombreros to their comrades across the Llanos, they galloped off at headlong speed toward the scene of brutal bloodshed, the Fighting Thompsons and Reckless Joe in the advance.

The bright light of the morning sun now shone upon ghastly mutilated forms, and the grass and flowers were stained with blood, as the Rangers dashed up within the limits of the settlement. The sight that met their eyes was one that maddened them, and strengthened and multiplied their oaths of vengeance.

Squads of soldiers were engaged in burying the dead. This was all that Major Reinbolt, the commandant of the fort, could do; although he knew how absurd and utterly useless it was to send infantry in pursuit of mounted hostiles, and bitterly censured the Government for their continual short-sighted policy in stationing cavalry where they were not needed and leaving the frontier unprotected.

But idle words availed not the stark and stiff corpses that lay scattered in ghastly groups about their log homes; and, after a brief consultation, the Rangers, leaving word with Major Reinbolt to inform Captain Burleson of their departure when he should arrive, spurred toward the north, passing the detachment of infantry, who gave them an encouraging cheer as they galloped like the wind over the well-marked trail of the Apache murderers.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRESH SURPRISE.

THE next morning, after the strange visit of Dark Dashwood to the Somers settlement, Old Rocky succeeded in getting the negro Jim over the river. The poor fellow had suffered greatly from the rough treatment of the outlaws, and was in a high fever; the flesh about his ankles was badly lacerated, and he had besides received sundry kicks and blows while being taken from his cabin to the place of torture.

For a part of the way, when he had stubbornly refused to walk, they tied a rope about his waist and secured the other end to the horn of a saddle, dragging him along. Being blindfolded, he frequently struck a bush or root, losing his foothold and falling to the earth. Then the outlaws would drag him some distance before allowing him to regain his feet.

He was now put to bed by his faithful spouse, who scolded Old Rocky for deceiving her in regard to the coon hunt.

Aunt Martha, having recovered from the fright given her by the panther, began at once to act in the character of physician. Jim soon fell asleep, but not until he had informed Old Rocky that he had seen Antonio, the Mexican, with Dashwood's band.

With this proof of the perfidy of the man who had been so kindly treated by the colonel, the scout now approached the latter with some consciousness of self-importance at having read so well the character of the Greaser; and, by almost insisting upon the wretch's discharge, perhaps saving the little settlement from falling into the hands of the prairie pirates.

The colonel was seated on the veranda in the same place where he had been when fired upon by Dark Dashwood, and held in his hand the bullet which he had just cut out from the post.

"Yer allers 'lowed since I were with yer,

“Curn’l,” said Rocky, as he seated himself by the side of his friend and lit his pipe, “thet I were purty well up ter readin’ folks, ef I warn’t smart enough ter know one letter from another, an’ I’s got suthin’ ter tell yer what’ll prove I warn’t so slow ’bout that Antone. Curn’l, that ther’ Greaser war with Dark Dashwood’s cusses las’ night.”

“You don’t tell me?” exclaimed Col. Somers, in surprise.

“I does tell yer, an’ I means hit. Jim see’d him in the crowd.”

“Then I am indeed deeply indebted to you, Young; for I did think him an honest man, and it really pained me to start him off alone on the dangerous trail southward.”

“Hit would ‘a’ pained yer, I reckon, a cussed sight more ef yer hed ’lowed him ter linger. But ef we ketch the yaller cuss a-stalkin’ roun’ hyer ag’in, we’ll slide him up a limb.”

“Yes, indeed. Such an ungrateful traitor has no right to live. I see that we are encompassed with danger, and fear that you and I will be forced to give up our proposed plan to go in search of my daughter.”

“Ya-as, I reckon we has got ter hang off a while yit afore we glides toward the sunset; but ef Burleson’s boys comes this away, es I’m purty sure they will, things’ll be safe enough ’roun’ hereabouts. Ef ther Rangers gits ’tween ther band and ther reds thar’ll be no danger o’ the weemin bein’ troubled, an’ we can scoot out an’ git back ’fore the boy makes a turn down country ag’in.”

Hattie and Mamie now came out, their faces showing suppressed mirth; the former having in her hand a new buckskin bullet-pouch beautifully embroidered, which she passed to the old scout.

“Mr. Young,” she said, “here is a present from Aunt Martha, which she wishes you to accept, together with her heartfelt thanks for your noble and self-sacrificing bravery in saving her life. She also proposes to make you a hunting-shirt to replace the one that was torn by the beast, and ornament it with the claws, if you will remove them from the skin, and dry them for her.”

To describe the child-like embarrassment of Old Rocky would be impossible, as the laughing eyes of the two young ladies and the colonel were bent upon his face during the brief address of Hattie.

“Tell yer a’nt, Miss Hattie,” he managed to articulate at last, “thet I’m muchly obleeged ter her; an’ thet though I doesn’t count hit nuthin’ but fun ter wipe out a painter, an’ didn’t ’spect no thanks for hit, I’ll pack thet bullet-bag es long es I kin sight a rifle, an’ hit shill lay aside o’ me when I’s planted, ef I dies ’mong white folks. I sw’ar ter grashus, ef hit warn’t for ther skeer A’nt Martha got I’d be dog done glad ther painter glided this-a-way.”

The young ladies both burst out in peals of laughter, and a smile dispelled the usual gloom from the face of Colonel Somers.

“Now,” said Mamie, “I wish to ask a favor of you, Mr. Young.”

“Hold yer hoss, Miss Mamie,” interrupted the scout, “afore I glides in easy with ther favor, es I ’lows ter do, I wants ter say that I feels es though I were a friend ter ther hull o’ this outfit, an’ ef all on yer feels that away, yer kin call on Old Rocky an’ not mister me. Hit’s a hard handle, I reckon, but name an’ natur’ differs. I’m not es hard es Dark Dashwood, I hopes, an’ seein’ yer all knows I’m squar’ an’ white yer must be fermiliar. But, ’scuse me, Miss Mamie, what was yer a-gwine ter ax me?”

The smiles faded from the faces of the young ladies at the mention of the outlaw; but, having great confidence in their defenders, they soon recovered their spirits, and Mamie continued her remark.

“I am perfectly willing, indeed I would much rather call you Rocky if it will please you, and you can drop the miss when you address Hattie and myself; can he not, Hattie?”

Certainly. We are all friends here,” replied Hattie; and both girls directed looks of true regard upon the old scout who, in spite of his peculiar ways and language, had gained their esteem and friendship.

“But,” added Hattie, “tell Rocky what we have decided between ourselves, Mamie.”

“Well, Rocky, we have found two small rifles among the extra arms which we can handle easily, and we wish you to give us some instructions as to their use; that we may, if there is an emergency, help to defend ourselves and our home. You have no objections, have you, father?”

“No, indeed,” replied the colonel; “I am pleased at your idea, and am proud to know that you are so thoughtful. Every woman who resides on the border should know the use of fire-arms.”

“Curn’l, I hates ter see yer look so gloomy all ther time. Don’t worry ’bout things. Yer must know thet I’m a member o’ Burleson’s Rangers, an’ war sent up this-a-ways ahead o’ ther boys ter kinder look out for trails. I tell yer we’ll clean out all ther reds from this ther Staked Plains when we gits started good. Hattie an’ Mamie, I shill try an’ l’arn yer how

ter shoot, but I reckon yer hed rather hev some o’ ther young men o’ Burleson’s company. Thar’s Bill Lambert now, a gay, brave boy what yer’d both fall in love with; an’ thar’s Ben an’ Billy Thompson, an’ Joe Booth, ’sides a heap o’ good-lookin’ lads what would jump from hyer up ter ther bowlder ter git a chance ter l’arn yer ter shoot. Howsomever, as they hain’t round, I’ll pitch in an’ do my best. When—

“My God! Who is that?”

CHAPTER XVII. AN EXILE FROM ERIN.

THESE words were spoken by the colonel abruptly, and with great agitation and alarm; springing to his feet as he spoke, and shading his eyes with his hands while he gazed toward the bowlder upon which Dashwood had stood the previous night. The others, greatly surprised, also directed their eyes to the same point.

“A human form, as I live,” said Colonel Somers, in a calmer voice; “and not one who means harm, or he would not thus expose himself.”

The old scout stood a moment, scrutinizing the object upon the rock, which appeared to be a man, stationary as a statue, and intently inspecting the settlement.

Old Rocky raised his rifle and took deliberate aim at the stranger, saying at the same time:

“I doesn’t purpose ter shoot, but I’ll make him spit music or git out’n thet ther persish.”

The form above became animated with life; his arms were thrown upward with the palms toward them—a sign of peace—while he yelled:

“Hould on wid yer shootin’. Sure I’m an orphin from Arin, an’ a long ways from home; an’ as white as yersilves pervidin’ I take a dacint wash. An’ sure I see a chance for that same below. Has yees anythin’ that’s aitable down there? It’s afther stharvin’ entirely, I am!”

“Take a glide down ther bank, an’ I’ll give yer a show ter fly over!” yelled Old Rocky, very much surprised, as indeed they all were, at seeing an unarmed man so far from the settlements and forts; and, at the same time, a little suspicious that he might be a spy of Dashwood’s.

The old scout shouldered his rifle, and proceeded to the river bank, where he sprang up a tree, and untying a lariat, the opposite end of which he secured to a limb far above that projected over the water. Directing the stranger to catch the rope, he gave it a quick whisk, sending it flying to the other side of the stream, where it was caught by the stranger, and held in hand.

The language of the new-comer proved him an Irishman, even had his face not indicated the same; and he was evidently in a forlorn condition. He had no covering whatever upon his head, and his bushy, tangled, reddish hair stood out in all directions, while his stiff and bristling beard gave him a look that was almost savage. An infantry coat, minus the skirts, a pair of ragged Government pantaloons, and shoes from which his bare toes protruded, made up his costume. A leather strap was buckled about his waist, serving to keep his pants in place; a sheath knife being thrust between the same and his body.

“Begorra, I might as well take a look at yees to see if I’m gettin’ intil dacint company. It’s a bad crowd I’ve fell in wid since I got me discharge.”

These remarks of the Irishman, as he gazed over the river at the scout, forced the latter into a roar of laughter.

“Yer doesn’t look yerself as ef yer orter be pertickler ’bout ther crowd yer fell in with; but, ter sot yer easy, I’ll tell yer we’re all straight up an’ squar’. What’s yer handle?”

“Handle; is it? Faith, divil the bit have I to handle, barrin’ the rags on me back!”

“What does yer call yerself?”

“Be the hole in me coat, ye’re right. I’ve had to call meself for many a day. The divil a wan else would do it.”

“What an’ yer name?” yelled Old Rocky, losing patience; while all the members of the little community had gathered on the bank below, gazing intently at the wild, haggard, ragged human in the tree.

“Me name, is it? Mother of Moses! I have one that’s honestly me own, an’ as dacint a one as ever was called out at a fair. Sure it’s Dennis McCafferty, from Ballinasloe, near the Shannon, a bit of a ride from Galway, where I tuck ship; an’ yees can shtop at any time till toast yer shins be the turf, an’ have a noggin of potheen widout the axin’, to say nothin’ of a potaty an’ a squeeze of goat’s milk if ye’re fasting. Hould tight! I’ll be wid ye in a minit.”

So saying, he made a desperate swing over the water. But his hands, he being weak from want of food and other privations, slipped along the rope, and with a wild, despairing cry, the Irishman cut the air in a thirty-foot plunge, and disappeared beneath the surface of the deep, dark river.

Although the spectators were in deep sympathy with the miserable man, they were

forced to roar with laughter at the contortions of his limbs and face as he came flying through the air.

Soon he came spluttering up from the depths, and kicked his way to the bank in a ludicrous manner, where he was quickly drawn out by Ernest and the colonel, and sat panting, while the old scout descended.

“Why didn’t yer hold on to ther rope?” asked Old Rocky, as he assisted him to his feet.

“Sure I c’udn’t. I’m as wake as an infant.” His looks and staggering steps told the same thing, but too plainly.

A substantial meal was set before him, and new, clean clothing was given him by Aunt Martha, and he was then directed beyond the bend to a place where he could take a bath and change his garments. After ths a shave followed, and the new arrival looked like a different man.

“Curnil Somers, as I hears them call ye,” said Dennis, “here’s me discharge from the army; an’ ye’ll oblige me by kapin’ it till I ax for it. I was afther bein’ at Fort Cobb a month ago, an’ it’s this far I’ve got toward San Antonio.”

“We thought, perhaps, that you had deserted,” said the colonel, “but this paper sets you all right.”

“Sure an’ I’m crazy wid the bare joy at findin’ sich good friends,” said Dennis. “An’ how do yees suppose I got me discharge?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t tell.”

“Well, be cripes, I fished for it!”

“Fished fer hit?” broke in Old Rocky, suspiciously, “how kin yer ’splain that?”

“Well, gintlemen, I’ll tell yees all about that same. I suppose ye all knows what a divil of a life sojerin’ is; if yees don’t, I’m the b’y that does, to me sorra. Well, I thried till get me papers, but widout success, till I begun till think I’d go crazy intirely. So at last, when off jaty, I gets me a bit of a fish-pole wid a bit of paper till the hook, an’ I sits in the middle of the parade-ground makin’ as if I was a-fishin’, d’ ye mind? Whiniver an officer w’ud come near, he’d yell at me, ‘What the divil are ye doin’ there, Dennis?’ An’ I’d answer, ‘Kape still! I’m afther fishin’ for me discharge.’ An’ he’d laugh, an’ pass on. Well, ye see, this wint on till they thought I was crazy sure enough, an’ so they give me the papers.”

They all laughed at McCafferty’s novel plan, as well as at his comical way of telling it.

“Didn’t yer run ag’in’ no reds ’tween this an’ Fort Cobb?” asked Old Rocky.

“Faith I did! A plenty of the murtherin’ divils!”

“And how did you escape them?” inquired the colonel.

“Sure I thought if I c’ud play crazy on the officers, I c’ud on the red haythens, an’ I did it till the savin’ of me scalp. Upon me sowl, I come as near laughin’ at them as anythin’ when they’d point up till the sky an’ tap their heads, an’ thin luck at me. Divil a wan of them w’ud harrum me, but away they’d ride wid a scar’d luck on them.”

But we need not detail further the conversation between Dennis, the colonel and Old Rocky. It satisfied them as to the honesty of the prairie wail, who had traveled so far, in such an unprotected manner, before reaching them. He had struck the trail of Dark Dashwood, and followed it in a famished condition, in hopes of finding at the camping points the debris of their cooking, before the wolves and buzzards had devoured it.

At his desire, he was at once adopted as one of the settlement, being engaged by the colonel as herder.

CHAPTER XVIII. RETRIBUTION.

ONCE more was the attention of the Somers settlement attracted toward the bowlder over the river.

This time it was the yell of Old Rocky that rung through the bottom timber, and caused them to rush down to the bank with joy, for he had been absent three days, and they had been alarmed for his safety.

Dennis had accompanied the old scout, and both well-known forms now stood upon the big rock, looking down toward their friends; but who was the other? There were three forms plainly to be seen, and the hands of the stranger were bound behind him, Dennis holding the lariat which was attached to the man’s neck.

Colonel Somers and Ernest, with two of the herders, soon made their way by the swinging rope over to the opposite shore, and were, in a moment after, standing by the side of the group gazing alternately in astonishment at Antonio, the Mexican, and their friends, Rocky and Dennis!

“Yees needn’t fear but what ye’ll see enough o’ this omadthaun of a Greaser,” said Dennis; “for we’ll soon be hangin’ him up till dbyr.”

“What does this mean, Rocky?” inquired the colonel, without noticing the remarks of Dennis.

“Waal,” answered the old scout, as he rested upon his rifle and pulled his tobacco from his pouch; “hit means ez how we hev cotched ther cuss, as I calkerlated on. Hit air a long story,

an' ef ye'll take a sot down, I'll take a whiff at my pipe, an' sling yer ther fac's in ther case."

The Mexican glared at those about him with fierce hatred, for he knew he neither deserved nor would he receive any mercy.

"Yer see," continued the scout as he seated himself comfortably on the bowlder and gave a satisfied look toward his captive, "Dennis an' me was a-skootin' 'round permiscu's-like, an' I had shied off from my pard ter look arter signs, leavin' him ter glide along ther reg'lar trail to'ards Palo Pinto. When I comes nigh onter ther trail ag'in, I heerd somebody a-slingin' gab. Yer kin reckon I war surprised. I crawled up clost an' still, an' I'll be doggoned ef thar warn't Antone an' Dennis a-sottin' by ther painted tree es ef they'd bin twin brothers. I see'd in a jiff that Antone didn't know't Dennis come from this ranch, an' war a-tryin' ter pump him in wuss English nor I slings myself. I cocked my shooter an' le'ped 'tween the cuss an' his nag. Ter say he war 'sprised 'ud be a-puttin' hit mild. He slung a power o' cuss-words, an' asserfidity slang jist rolled off his tongue es fast an' easy es ther drink glides over ther Blanco Falls when there's a big rain on the Devil's Backbone. I allers hed a heap o' pity for a galoot what's skeery, an' so I histed up ter ther Montezumy an' gi'n him a spesim'n or tough lingo what struck him."

Here Old Rocky puffed nervously at his pipe, and Antonio stood with teeth grating like a wounded wolf's, casting his black eyes about the timber as if he looked for a rescue.

"What did you say to him?" asked the colonel.

"I axed him in a gentle, cooin' sort of a way ef he'd lived ter grow ther size he war 'thout flidin' out he war a low, sneakin' skunk of a ladrone, not decent enough ter 'sociate with a wood-tick, Rivered Riote? I tole him I know'd he war a pard o' Dark Dashwood's. At that he got ready ter scoot, but he see my shootin'-iron onter him, an' his fingers went for his sticker. I went for him quicker'n a teranteler kin jump. But ter cap ther hull thing, curn'l, arter me an' Dennis hed tied the cuss onter his hoss, an' idee struck me he warn't at Palo Pinto for nuthin', an' I soon found that Dark Dashwood hed left a sign for some of his red pards, directin' them this a-way. I hasn't the leastest doubt that Antone hes bin onter a trip ter ther south'ard arter ther red sculpers ter cl'ar out this ranch. I hes done smokin' nuw, Antone, an' I'll jist 'tend ter yer biz in two skips of a mountain goat."

"Dennis," directed the old scout, "yer jist climb up thet tree an' I'll sling ther rope at yer."

"Sure ye'll be after givin' the haythen a chance till say a few prayers, won't ye, Misther Rocky?" expostulated the Irishman.

"Ther cuss mought pray from now ontil ther hot regions friz over, an' bit wouldn't save a ha'r of his head from burnin'" replied Rocky. "Skip up that tree. I reckon I knows my biz."

The Mexican, although he did not understand all that the scout had said, knew by the stern looks of those around him, that his time had come. Colonel Somers, although he deplored the necessity for lynch law, felt that the case demanded prompt action, as there could be no doubt that Dark Dashwood would attempt a rescue should Antonio be kept confined. Dennis speedily gained one of the limbs to which a fragment of rope still dangled that had served the negro at the time of his terrible torture, and the sight of which steeled them all against the base traitor who had betrayed them to the bandit chief.

The rope was adjusted, and Old Rocky called Dennis and the herders to his assistance to pull it over the limb when he gave the word. Then looking Antonio in the eye, who, with the exception of a slight pallor, kept up a fierce look of defiance, he said:

"Now, yer low-lived son of a squaw, yer has but a flectin' period ter gaze on ther beauties o' natur'. We-uns air a gwine ter sling yer up ter dry fer bein' a spy an' a traitor. Has yer anythin' ter say in ther way of gab that's reasonable, why yer shouldn't glide up suddint like?"

At this instant came the sound of galloping steeds, and Old Rocky sprung to the rope, yelling:

"Pull ther cuss up, an' tie ther rope quicker'n lubricatin' lightnin'! Dark Dashwood air a-comin'!"

As the sound of hoofs struck the ear of the doomed Mexican, his face lighted up with a look of demoniac exultation, but the next moment he was twitched with powerful force high in the air, and hung kicking and writhing spasmodically, while the Texans sprung to the trunk of the tree and secured the slack end of the lariat.

"Grab yer shooters!" yelled Old Rocky; "an' 'member thar's weemin below. Skoot behind ther trees!"

Not a thousand yards away, around the bend, at this moment galloped into view Dark Dashwood at the head of a dozen of his cut-throats, some one of whom, while acting spy, must have seen Antonio brought in, and hastened to the camp of the bandits to report, and start a

"Cut that man down, or I'll lay your ranch in ashes!" called out the outlaw chief, as they came to a sudden halt, beyond the range of the rifles.

Not a word or a sound broke the stillness of the bottom, but the gleam of rifle barrels from behind the trees spoke volumes.

The body of Antonio was twitching in the agonies of death, and Dark Dashwood, with a hasty order, galloped parallel to the river and toward the place of execution, his men following singly some ten feet apart.

Down they came like a whirlwind, and one at a time stopped within a hundred yards and fired their rifles, with the evident idea of shooting away the rope that was choking the life from their comrade bandit.

"Don't shoot a gun until I squeals!" ordered Old Rocky; "we is too few ter waste powder!" Seeing, at last, that Antonio was at the point of death Dark Dashwood yelled:

"Turn, men, and charge! Cut down our pard, Billyum; and, Ward, we'll attend to the fighting biz!"

Turning their horses, the bandits spurred like the wind toward the rock; the two outlaws designated by the chief spurring their horses up to the bowlder.

Then came the crack of rifles from the timber, and both bandits fell dead from their horses.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ENCOUNTER.

A PANDEMONIUM of yells, revolver and rifle shots followed from both parties, amid which the outlaw chief, realizing how dearly he was paying for his rashness, yelled:

"Vamonous! Follow me!" And turning his horse to where E-nest was loading his rifle behind a tree, the whole gang charged after their leader, who struck the young Texan a blow with the butt of his revolver, knocking him senseless, and then, with herculean strength, dragging the limp form up before him in his saddle, all galloped out of range; while a loud fiendish yell of exultant laughter broke from Dark Dashwood as he held upward at arm's length the apparently dead youth to the view of the horrified settlers.

"His life for Antonio's!" cried the bandit. "For the others who lie there, I'll call for my pay in good time."

Getting out of rifle range, again he yelled:

"John Somers! Your family is now two less. I'll come for the girls in good time. Adios!" and bearing Ernest before him, the outlaw and his cut-throat band galloped from sight, leaving behind them four of their number, stark and stiff in death.

Old Rocky gazed in silent sympathy toward Colonel Somers, who sat in a dazed state upon the sward, completely prostrated with this last blow, as with a nervous twitching of his features he looked after the disappearing outlaws.

Wiping out his rifle, and expectorating spitefully, the old scout showed by his actions that this last, unlooked-for calamity caused him for the time to lose his usual self-command, through extreme regard for the feelings of those whom he had learned to regard so highly.

Ernest had been the pride of all; and even the herders hastily drew their sleeves across their eyes as his loved form disappeared, held in the clutch of one who lived upon revenge, and who had banished from his vocabulary the word mercy.

The women and others, who had been left below in the bend, were now gathered about the ranch, gazing in the greatest anxiety and alarm over the stream, and wondering at the recent sounds of conflict; the bandits having only been visible from the settlement for a moment, owing to the high bank and the heavy timber.

All who had been engaged in the conflict felt averse to returning, and being forced to explain the absence of Ernest to his mother, aunt and sisters; and the colonel seemed to be demented by this new misery.

At last Old Rocky could bear the sight of his friend's agony no longer, and he approached the colonel.

"I know it air doggoned cussed hard ter bear," he said, "but it air got ter be did. I hain't lost confidence in Him what made this yearth, yit. Ye're edercated an' above me in understandin', an' yer ortent ter give up this a-way. Thar hangs a cuss what have come to his end in a tough sorter way for his misdeeds; an' thar lays more of his sort that hes jist met ther desarts. Now, why can't yer think that folks what lives squar' an' straight lives is sometime gwine ter hev things turn out accordin'! Jist brighten up a leetle, an' every thing 'll turn out hunk. I know things looks dark and doubtful, but thar's allers a big pinch o' sunshine arter a cloud hes passed over; an' I'm teetotally bamboozled ef we, an' you 'speshally, ain't a-gittin' ther storm now, an' thet goes ter show thet it'll be sun-up afore long. Go ter ther weemin, curn'l, an' I'll take a lone scout arter Dark Dashwood, an' durn me ef I don't git a bead on him. I'll wipe him out. I'm a-gwine for Ernest on ther jump." And Old Rocky gave a warm grasp of the hand, and

then, with a long stride, and with determination in his pale face, passed out of the bottom and disappeared on the trail of the outlaw band that had captured one of his best friends.

CHAPTER XX.

A FAIRY COURT.

THREE days after the departure of the war-party from the valley, the golden-haired prophetess of the Apaches sat upon her couch of skins, her maids weaving the flowers of the valley into a canopy above her head.

There were a dozen of these maidens; all captives from Mexico, and all prepossessing in appearance, and gifted with more than ordinary intelligence, they having been selected for these qualities to wait upon Child-of-the-Sun.

All of them adored their mistress, and not one in the camp but would have sacrificed life for her who was thought to hold converse with the Good Spirit.

It was early morning, and the old squaws having eaten their breakfast, had taken the animals out from the valley some five miles to fresh pasturage, intending also to hunt for game.

For some weeks the beautiful captive had meditated escape from the savage horde who had held her in bondage for so many years; and each day the hope of being once more folded in the arms of her parents became less a dream than a reality.

It was reality to her. They had lived, and still must be living, and pining for her presence. She had become a woman. The long trail which she had come when first torn from her home might have seemed longer than it was now. She was willing to brave every privation and danger, could she once more behold those of her own race. Each day her purpose had become strengthened. Her little saddle and bridle, which had been given her by her father, and which had been so many times buckled about her pony, Blanco, she had been allowed to keep; and often she drew them out from a pile of robes in which she kept them hidden, to look upon them as the great link that bound her to the past. Then there was the little music-box, which had probably been the means of saving her life. It had certainly helped to gain for her the high position that she held in the tribe. She never had dared exhibit it, except when she pretended to talk through it, lest the Indians becoming familiar with its sounds might cease to regard it as a mystery.

Since the departure of Lone Wolf and his war-party, she had been constantly digesting in her mind plans for escape; and upon the morning that we bring her to the notice of the reader she had resolved to carry them out, in what seemed to her the most feasible manner of getting away from the valley unnoticed.

The absence of nearly all the squaws from the little sequestered retreat, decided her action; and, addressing herself to one of her attendants, she gave directions to send those who remained away down the valley to gather more flowers. As soon as they had departed beyond the cottonwoods, Child-of-the-Sun called her favorites about her.

Having previously wound up the music-box, she laid it before her and touched the spring. As the liquid notes fell upon the ears of the maids, they instantly covered their eyes with their hands and bent their heads at the feet of their mistress.

As the melody ceased, Child-of-the-Sun sprung to her feet, and stood, as imposing as a queen upon her throne, her face turned heavenward, and her right hand pointing to the sunlit sky. Then, speaking in a voice that corresponded with her beauty, power and position, she said:

"Listen, daughters of Apache-land!"

In an instant each maiden withdrew her palms from her eyes and gazed in awe and reverence upon their queen and mistress.

"Listen to Child-of-the-Sun. She has good words. They have come like the songs of little birds to her ears. The Good Spirit is angry with his child. He says she must go to the people of her own color, toward the morning sun. Who will go with Child-of-the-Sun on the long trail over the big plains? Let her who rides toward the big waters stand on her feet and raise her hand toward the home of the Good Spirit."

Folding her arms, Child-of-the-Sun looked down upon the circle of maidens, who all sprung to their feet.

"It is good. Child-of-the-Sun will not be lonely. Those she loves will go with her. Let your tongues sleep. Sing not my song in the ears of the old squaws. Take your bows and arrows. Child-of-the-Sun will give you the things that she wants on the trail. When the dark comes, and the squaws sleep, we will go. I have spoken."

A wave of her hand dismissed all except the two maids who stood nearest her. By a gesture of the hand she requested them to stay.

Not a shadow of doubt as to what they ought to do seemed to enter their minds. It took but a short time for each, at the bidding of her mistress, to secure her limited wardrobe and arms, and hide the same, and, ere the squaws had re-

turned, they were all in attendance upon Child-of-the-Sun.

When the shadows of night settled upon the earth, all was in readiness. Child-of-the-Sun, surrounded by a portion of her maids, stole with motions light and graceful beneath the cotton-woods, where thirteen horses were fully equipped and held by others of her favorites. Five others stood near, packed with the necessary food and robes for their journey.

Mounting her beautiful and fleet pony, Child-of-the-Sun walked him slowly through the valley, followed by her maids, those in the rear leading the pack-horses with lariats. Not until they had passed the vast towering turrets of rock at the entrance to the valley so long her home did the young girl come to a halt and turn toward the natural battlements. Then, as the crescent moon appeared above the horizon and lit up those gigantic walls that had so long hidden her from the outer world, she waved her hand toward them in farewell; and, holding out her arms as if to embrace the bright beacon in the east, gave a flute-like cry of joy and bounded toward the Pecos like a bird escaped from its cage.

The maidens gazed for an instant in superstitious wonder at her actions; then, answering her cry in concert, they galloped, a phalanx of beauty, after her of the wide, streaming locks of gold.

Many a time, under the escort of Lone Wolf, had she ridden to the Pecos ford; so she knew well the route. Many a time had he told her that a hundred moons' ride would not take her to where he had found her, a lost child in the woods, as she had dropped from the sun; but his words seemed to her now more unreasonable than ever.

Every bound of her pony filled her with a nameless feeling that was strange to her, but which originated from a sense of freedom never before felt, and an approach to hearts that were still torn and bleeding from her loss.

But little did they, any of them, know of the long, long weary days before them, when those dancing ponies would hang their heads and stagger along the plains in weariness and suffering. Little did they know of the arid prairies they must pass, and how their tongues would burn like coals of fire, and their eyes glare with an insane longing for the water that existed only in their imaginations.

They suffered all this, and a thousand times more than pen could describe; but, thanks to their savage training, thanks to the pure air of Heaven, that had never entered their lungs contaminated by poisonous gases, they passed through the ordeal, crossed the barren belt and entered the verdant prairies watered by the Colorado and its tributaries.

CHAPTER XXI. WORSE THAN DEATH.

DARK DASHWOOD had good reasons for not attacking the Somers settlement until he had secured reinforcements from the Apaches; as his band, by frequent losses, had become thinned, and only two were left in the camp of the outlaw when he went up the river to attempt the rescue of Antonio.

These two were greatly surprised to see their chief return at break-neck speed, his face and manner indicating intense passion.

They saw he had but one captive, and that four of their partners in crime were missing; to say nothing of the Mexican, who did not return with them as had been expected.

Like a tiger deprived of its prey, the outlaw chief bounded into his camp, yelling at the two men in a voice of madness and command.

"Bring up that horse we picked up on the trail, and which none of you could ride! I had thought to let the wild cuss run, but I've a use for the animal now. Curse the infernal luck! Only eleven of us left. Four good and true men gone to the devil—yes, five! But, boys, by the eternal gods of the ancients we'll make them howl for mercy yet. We've been playing a losing game, but I've got good cards left. Dark Dashwood, the dare-devil, is a long way from being dead yet, and he'll have his revenge on that Somers. I'll take everything he has got to lose, and then my knife shall drink his blood!"

At this moment his men who had been ordered to go for the horse appeared, being dragged over the ground by the animal, and one holding upon each side of the strong buffalo hair head-stall.

Snorting, prancing and kicking, the wild mustang was brought to a halt, and the bandit chief gazed upon the beast with evident satisfaction, as he dropped Ernest to the ground.

"There lies one of Somers's darlings that he'll never see again. I don't care to kill him, for he never harmed me, and no Somers blood runs in his veins; but he has had the misfortune to be associated with, and called the son of the man I've sworn to bend to the earth with grief. We'll make no words, however. About it, boys. A poor show we'll give him, but I can't let him off alive any other way. Bind him on the horse, do you hear? Bind him on the back of that horse! He must play Mazeppa to the life—or death, perhaps."

The repetition of his command was occasioned

by his noticing a hesitancy and an apparent surprise, mingled with a shade of sympathy, among his followers.

"Do you hear, men? Bind him fast to the wild horse of the plains. I say he shall play Mazeppa without any more spectators than his predecessor had. The wolves shall howl his requiem, and the buzzards shall croak his funeral sermon!"

Before Dashwood had ceased speaking his followers, knowing it to be useless to reason with their chief, for, hardened though they were, they shuddered at the thought of the suffering in store for their captive, raised Ernest Somers from the ground and threw him, still senseless, along the back of the affrighted steed; a girth having been buckled about the animal's body previously, and a hair rope running from the same and about the roots of the tail.

Ernest's head was covered with blood from the blow he had received, and the wound broke forth afresh when he was thrown upon the horse.

It was a difficult task for the half-dozen outlaws to secure the captive to the animal's back; laying him at full length, his feet projecting over the mustang's tail, for the horse was wrought up into a state of frenzy by cuffs and kicks, as well as by the tightly-drawn ropes.

At last they sprung away, having secured the ropes in the best manner possible; at the same time having left them as loosely as they dared under the eye of their chief, to prevent the cords from cutting into the flesh more than was necessary, and at the same time hold the victim in position.

Held by a lariat at a long reach, the mustang bounded about, throwing foam from his mouth and tearing up the sod with his hoofs.

A satanic, exultant expression rested upon the face of Dark Dashwood as he saw the eyes of Ernest Somers open and gaze in surprise, agony and wonder at his surroundings.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed. "He has awakened to bid us good-by. Say, my friend; which way do you propose traveling? But I might as well admit and assert that I have a right to dictate the direction myself—that is, for the start. The devil himself can't tell where that horse will meander, but there's a sure thing where you'll fetch up, my chicken. You'll land in the valley of death. Slip the head-stall, boys. Stick a knife into the nag's ham, and point his head westward toward the great plains. Hold!" he added, as a wild, diabolical laugh burst from his lips; "point the horse up-stream, and let him stampede past Somers's ranch. The boy may want to say *adios* to his friends, and I'm dead sure the whole layout can't stop that nag when he's once started."

One instant the quivering mustang stood, his eyes blazing and his nostrils distended; then he settled back on his haunches, and with a snort and a wild scream, as a knife was hurled into his ham, the animal sprung into the air with a bound, shaking like an aspen, and then flew, like an arrow shot from the bow, out of the bandit camp, and up the Brazos, not fifty yards from the bottom timber and parallel with it.

On, on like the wind, bearing Ernest Somers upon his back, his heart throbbing with horror and pain at every bound of the affrighted steed, and his brain filled with despair and dread at the fearful fate in store for him.

On, on, past the crouching form of Old Rocky, who gazed with an awful intensity and amazement at the most heart-rending sight. For the first time in his life he was appalled and hopeless, for he well knew the form upon the horse to be that of Ernest Somers.

On, on, like the blast of a norther, past a man made old before his time by grief and anguish of mind, and who staggered to his feet and gazed horror-stricken at the fearful sight. One moment, and then, with the words, "Great God, Thou hast forsaken me!" he fell prone upon the sward, stricken with an anguish and a despair beyond comprehension, while over his senseless form, swaying in the evening breeze, hung Antonio, his face blackened, his tongue protruding, his eyes bulging and glaring in seeming horrible exultation upon the man whose sufferings before his senses forsook him were a thousand times worse than death.

CHAPTER XXII.

STRATEGIC MOVEMENTS.

WHEN Old Rocky, much to his surprise and horror, saw what he felt too surely was the form of Ernest Somers stretched and bound upon a wild horse, and flying like the wind, he felt for the moment overpowered with despair.

The old scout was on his way to find the camp of Dark Dashwood, filled with a determination of rescuing his young friend at the risk of his own life; but he was thus forced to see him in the most terrible position in which a heartless savage could place him.

He dared not think of the effect of this sight upon Col. Somers, so he seated himself for a moment in the shelter of the underbrush to collect his thoughts that were scattered by the dangers and calamities with which his friends were surrounded, and trying to see some way

out of their misfortunes—to think of some grounds for hope in the case of Ernest.

"One thing I air thankful for. Five o' Dark Dashwood's devils, countin' Antone, has passed in their chips— Dog-gone my half-sister's black cat!"

The last expression left the scout's lips in extreme surprise, mingled with gratification, as he put up his pipe and dropped flat upon the ground, peering through the bushes, as he added in a whisper:

"Talkin' o' ther Satanic subjects allers fetches some on 'em round."

Quickly running his rifle through the twigs, he took deliberate aim at one of the outlaws, evidently sent up the river as a spy, and who was making his way cautiously through the timber. The gurgling sound which followed the sharp crack of the rifle told all that Old Rocky wished to know, as he reloaded and started for the bend, muttering as he ran:

"Dashwood have sent another man arter Antone, but I reckon he didn't count on ther cuss a-follerin' him clean through ter brimstone head-quarters." And he laughed at his own wit, forgetting for the moment their great and recent trouble.

But he was immediately reminded of the day's successes and misfortunes; the former, by glancing up at the swaying, hideous body of the Mexican, the latter by stumbling over the prostrate and senseless form of Col. Somers. Hastily springing to his feet, he stepped back, gathered the form of the colonel in his strong arms, and sat him upon a rock while he fanned his face with his old *seabrero*, his heart meanwhile filled with pity and compassion for his friend.

In a moment, the colonel opened his eyes, filled with the shadow of an incomprehensible affliction, but as his gaze fell upon the distorted features of Antonio and the other dead outlaws, a shudder convulsed his frame.

His eyes met those of the old scout, and in them he read a deep sympathy and a sincere regard, which not only gave him hope but also told him that Old Rocky had seen the fast flying mustang with the hapless Ernest.

"Hit air bad enough," he said; "but we hes got suthin' else ter do 'sides mourn for them as is gone. We must perfect them as is left with us, an' fix for hot work, for hit's a-comin', sure as ther sun."

"You are right, my friend," answered the colonel; "I am ashamed of myself, and of my weakness, but I have disease of the heart brought on by the loss of my daughter, which prostrates me at times; but I am ready now to fight like a fiend, if need be, for those that are left to me."

"Ye're talkin' solid loss sense now, curn't; an' I'm with yer, tooth and nail," exclaimed the scout, as they both swung over the rope and joined their friends below, who were all collected upon the veranda: the women in tears, for Dennis and the two herders had gone before, at the orders of the colonel, to inform them of the capture of Ernest.

"My friends," said Col. Somers, in a calm, clear voice; "the misfortunes of to-day must lie quiet in our hearts while we use our utmost endeavors to prevent any enemy from penetrating our stronghold. Dennis, go immediately to the corral, mount your horse and order the herders to drive in the stock from the plain. We are able to attack at any moment, and are too weak in numbers to allow any of our company to be absent unless it be absolutely necessary. When Antonio was captured, Rocky tells me he had without doubt but just returned from seeking the assistance of the Indians, and he may have prevailed upon them to join the outlaws in their war upon our new home. I regret having induced you to come here, but regrets avail nothing. We will defend ourselves to the death, for worse than death will follow defeat. Aunt Martha, show yourself the brave woman that you are, and prepare ammunition for us. Wife, you and Hattie, and Mamie will assist. I know you suffer greatly from our loss, but we must think of ourselves when we are surrounded by merciless foes. Rocky, come with me; I have a plan to propose to you."

The women entered the house, sobbing convulsively, for Ernest had endeared himself to all; and the colonel, with the old scout, passed around to the corral, where they came to a halt, the former continuing his remarks:

"My plan, Rocky, is to plant a few kegs of powder, just outside the fence, at intervals. We can then dig a trench to each keg, under the pickets, and connected them by reeds filled with powder, and wrapped with dry grass to prevent their becoming damp. This would enable us, should a large force assail from this, the only point at which numbers could attack, to blow them into eternity. I admit that it is a fearful and a cowardly mode of warfare, but it is surely excusable when women and children are to be protected from such fiends as these outlaws and their Indian allies are known to be. What do you think of the idea?"

"Hit air jist ther most sensible talk yer hes slung since we struck the Brazos," said the old scout, with satisfaction; "an' I'm jist a banker-

in' ter tech off one o' ther kegs, an' send some o' ther cusses a-howlin' hum. Hit'll giv' 'em a taste o' ther climin' o' ther country whar they bes got ter locate." And Old Rocky slapped the colonel on the back, overjoyed to see that his friend was beginning to shake off the intense depression that had ruled him, and was entering into thoughts of defense.

"I am glad to know you agree with this plan, Rocky. I had thought of it before, but rejected it as too inhuman a mode of warfare, but now I think that any means that can be used against such enemies as we have to contend with, must be brought into requisition. This shall be attended to in the morning. I am glad that I laid in a good store of powder, and it cannot be exploded in a better cause than ridding the earth of such fiends. I hope and pray that we shall see no more of them."

"I hes sent one more ter his long home sence we hed the scrimmage. He war sneakin' up ter ther ranch ter see whar our weak p'int is, I reckon, when I p'inted him for another place, whar he kin hunt a drop o' water from this on ter eternity."

"You are always ready and never surprised, Rocky, and I think that one reason they have not attacked the settlement openly in broad daylight, is that they stand in dread of your unerring rifle. That makes six of Dark Dashwood's band that have been killed to-day. I would like much to know how many more men he has."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PAINTED TREE.

It was a bright moonlight night three days after the massacre at Fort Mason, that Old Rocky, after a lone scout to ascertain if any fresh Indian trails approached near the Somers settlement, found himself beneath the outstretched broken limbs of the weird Painted Tree, which appeared more ghastly still by moonlight. The many various-shaped and singular characters in vermilion, through the influence of the wild and silent surroundings, seemed ominous drawings done in blood.

The shadows beneath the oak appeared doubly dark and gloomy from deep contrast with the bright moonlight.

Not the flutter of a wing, nor the buzz of an insect relieves the scene, all being solemn silence, which is painful to him who leans upon his rifle, and is almost forced to think himself alone in the world; that all living things have been suddenly swept from the earth, while this very tree beneath which he stands is a symbol of destruction, and seems mocking his loneliness.

The breathings of nature are hushed, and not a zephyr fans the weary old scout, who, brave though he is, is obliged to own to himself that the silence seems a harbinger of evil. He is forced to enter thus far into the labyrinth of superstition.

He sinks to the earth by the trunk of the tree, and seems to cower as much as is possible from the view of—he knows not what. A nameless dread chills his blood, while the moon shines gloatingly down upon his loneliness.

Regardless of the strength of his iron will, a presentiment of coming danger, horrible in form, is forced upon his mind, without any visible cause or foundation for such conclusion. Shaking himself suddenly, and slapping the breech of his rifle, as if reproving his only comrade for entertaining thoughts like his own, the old scout breaks out in soliloquy:

"I'll jist be doggoned ef I hadn't orter stay in camp, scrape fryin' pans, an' w'ar caliker. Ah—No!" he continued; as if the last word had suddenly solved the strange riddle of his peculiar imaginings. "Thet air hit, dead sure an' sartin. Hit's the feminine genders that makes a man soft as a bog 'bout a sulfer spring. A'nt Marthy hev done the job for me; thet's a solid Bible fac'."

Here Old Rocky sprung to his feet as if a whole keg of powder had exploded beneath him. A far-off murmur, an indescribable sound strikes his ear like the flight of ten thousand birds high up in the heavens, but changing shortly until it resembled the labored breath of a coming storm.

A moment more he waits in the same position, when a perceptible rumble like the distant roll of thunder seems to contradict his senses, which tell him that the sound is connected with the earth.

It must be caused by a large body of animals, either driven, ridden, or both, in a stampede.

It cannot be the latter. This fact flies through his brain, for the buffalo range is far westward, the mustang range far to the south, and there is no stock within a hundred miles, except that of Colonel Somers, which is on the other side of the Rio Brazos.

Hardly a moment after this reasoning did the scout linger, for he felt, he knew, that the dread horror, whatever it was, that had so affected him, was now approaching.

Bounding across the opening toward the north-east, he sprung up into the limbs of the largest tree he could find, making his way to its topmost branches, where he could be hidden

from view, and at the same time could observe what might pass up the trail.

The sounds now indicated, without a doubt, the thunder of a thousand hoofs over the dry, parched turf, and the old scout's worst suspicions were soon realized; for two Indian braves, in hideous war-paint came dashing up the trail, like flying fiends of the night.

Here and there, to the east and west, were others; some plunging madly through the timber beneath him, all in a scattered line forming the advance guard. Halting at the foot of the Painted Tree, the foremost braves, by cutting the air with their raw-hide whips, and dexterously guiding their own animals, succeeded in turning the herd to the north-west into a small opening some fifty yards from the trail, when the whole herd was brought to a stop without a word being spoken by the fierce beings who controlled them.

It was evident to Old Rocky that these would soon be followed by a large war-party who had been on a raid to the down-country settlements; and that they had traveled a long time, and at great speed, as the condition of the animals indicated, even by moonlight.

That the war-party intended camping at Palo Pinto was also evident, and was forced upon the scout with the thought that in the event of his being kept in his present position until daylight, he would stand a slim chance for his life. But he had no time to deliberate. On they came in a wild gallop on their mustangs, which were maddened by the cruel torture necessary to keep them at speed, for an Indian has no mercy nor feeling for his horse; even when the animal, by its speed, saves the life of its brutal master.

The sight of the war-party riding suddenly into the opening was no more than what was expected by Old Rocky; but he was not prepared for what he discovered the moment the Indians came to a halt before the Painted Tree.

It was a sight that caused his fingers to grip and tear about the limbs that supported him, his teeth to grate together with madness, and his eyes to stare with dread horror and pity, changing suddenly to involuntary determination, as he thrust his rifle through the foliage, pointing the weapon toward the savage horde; then, realizing his position, a heavy sigh shook his frame, and he settled back against the oak in an agony of apprehension.

The sight that affected the old scout was truly heart-rending; for, as the savages came to a halt and dismounted, four white captives still remained, bound fast to their animals.

Here and there, the Indians scattered, leading their horses to graze outside the opening. The captives were rudely cut loose, amid insults and jeers, and then roughly jerked from the horses, falling upon the earth, stiff and weakened by torturing cords.

In plain sight of Old Rocky, the poor sufferers, two men and two young women, were dragged by the hair to a position near the Painted Tree, where stakes were driven into the ground and their outstretched limbs secured in a torturing manner, amid soul-searching groans of agony and despair.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TORTURE.

BUT a moment's inspection of the savage cohort is needed by Old Rocky to know beyond doubt, not only that the savages are Apaches, but that Lone Wolf the scourge of the border, commands in person.

Accompanied by Rolling Thunder, the Apache chief approached the Painted Tree, and in an instant discovered the mystic signs upon its trunk which had been cut by Dark Dashwood. He evidently understood their meaning; and, digging away at the grass and earth, uncovered the paper. With a deep, hoarse grunt of satisfaction, as he deciphered the meaning of the characters, Lone Wolf held the paper left by the outlaw up to the moonlight, and then gave a peculiar signal understood by his sub-chief.

That the Apache expected to find it was certain, or he would not have been so far north on the war-path.

The old scout had not long to meditate. Lone Wolf marched up, and seated himself directly under the tree in the branches of which Old Rocky was concealed. Silent, grim and terrible in their war-paint, half-a-dozen others followed and seated themselves, forming a circle. Lone Wolf, holding the paper in his hand, spoke in a low, exultant tone!

"Chiefs of the Pecos! Chiefs of Apache land! You are far from your hunting-grounds. You are at the Painted Tree of the Comanches, the tree that talks. It has told many things to Lone Wolf. The white chief of many horses has been here. He left a talk-paper for your chief. We have swept like the whirlwind upon the white dogs at Mason. We laughed at the blue-coats who carry knives on their rifles. Our war-cries made them sick. They hid behind their logs, and the Apache took many scalps. We took many horses. The tongue of Child-of-the-Sun is not forked. She has said that we will come to the valley with our belts heavy with scalps—with our trail wide with many horses. We want more. We are hungry for

blood. The Texans have come. They have built their log-cabins but a sun's ride from the Painted Tree. The Comanches are asleep. The Apaches are awake. Their eyes are open. Their knives are sharp. They must take more scalps. There is room for more on our belts. The dogs of Mason we had saved for torture in the mountains must die at Palo Pinto. There are more on the Brazos. Lone Wolf has spoken."

He stepped out, and, followed by the sub-chiefs, went toward the Painted Tree.

To describe the feelings of Old Rocky, who had overheard the speech of Lone Wolf, would be impossible. He comprehended the great danger in which he and his friends were; indeed he saw no chance to save them from the overwhelming force which he knew would be at the bend by another night. Was it possible for him to reach his horse which, for prudential reasons, he had left half a mile away?

He might do so, but there was a small chance of evading the many eyes, and he did not know where the vedettes were posted.

Filled with fearful apprehensions in regard to the jeopardy of the Somers settlement, he had forgotten the latter part of Lone Wolf's speech. He was soon reminded of it by a signal from that chief, which brought the warriors not on duty *en masse* to the skeleton oak.

In horror the scout awaited what he felt was to follow, the sweat standing in great drops upon his forehead, for he knew he would now be forced to witness a most inhuman scene, without the power either to fly, or to assist the sufferers who were of his own color.

A huge fire now blazed near the captives, whose upturned faces were rendered more ghastly and pitiable by its light.

Did they realize for what purpose were those lariats dangling from the bleached limbs of the oak, with wooden bars attached, and sharpened at either end? No, thank God! Their agony was severe enough without knowing this until the time came.

Amid confused yells, the two men—strong, sturdy Texans—were loosened from the earth, stripped naked, led up to the tree, and again forcibly held to the ground by a half-dozen braves. At this instant yells of agony filled the air, such as caused Old Rocky to clasp his hands over his ears and tremble like an aspen. The next moment he saw the two Texans strung up to the oak, like carcasses at a slaughter-house, the points of the bars running through the tendons of the ankles, which were made to support their bodies thus suspended, head downward, while they writhed in agony, and their shrieks were blood-curdling.

Below them the dancing demons hooted and howled in derision, thrust burning brands into their quivering flesh until the poor sufferers were too weak to make any outcry; then the red fiends, drawing their knives across the bodies, allowed the bowels of the still living men to run out, hang downward, and trail upon the sward, as they tore the reeking scalps off the Texan heads amid a vocal pandemonium!

The blood-stained, inhuman butchers now sprung with wild yells toward the young ladies, tearing the garments in shreds from their fair forms, their wild shrieks of horror and screams for help causing the hot tears to run down the old man's cheeks, who, unable to longer endure it, clambered in a dazed way down the oak, regardless of his personal danger, and staggered toward his horse.

Luckily for the scout, the attention of the Indians was taken up with their captives, and he reached his mustang without being observed.

Weak and faint with horror, the screams of the Texan girls filling his ears, and conscious that a more brutal, a more hellish act was now being committed than the one he had already witnessed, Old Rocky drove spurs deep and headed his mustang toward the Brazos.

Before the horse of the old scout had taken a dozen bounds, he observed a mounted Apache guard just ahead of him, and gathering all his strength, feeling that the lives of many might depend on his skill for the next moment, he spurred on like a leaf before the gale, and before the Indian could turn his pony to meet danger from a point totally unexpected, the rifle-barrel of the scout, whose arm was nerved by unbounded hatred, intensified by the recently witnessed horrors, crashed through the Apache's skull.

Hastily securing the dead Indian to the saddle of the latter, he grasped the jaw-strap and sped on with the corpse of the vedette, urging both animals by lash and spur toward the Brazos, the yells of despair, terror and agony still ringing in his ears, his eyes glaring glassily and fixedly ahead, his brain dazed with horror, his future filled with clouds of despair and desperation, shown in every dash of the spur and twitch of the rein.

CHAPTER XXV.

BLOOD CRYING FOR VENGEANCE.

HAD Old Rocky lingered five minutes longer in his perch among the branches of the oak, he would have seen two braves ride like the wind from the down trail among the assembled warriors of Lone Wolf, and heard them yell:

"Los Texanos! Vamonos!"

This is not the usual method with the Indians of giving news, but the occasion demanded prompt attention, and the rear guard, knowing the extreme danger in which their fellow-butchers were now placed, took this hasty and abrupt way of communicating the facts, as they saw that all were intent on their hellish work.

When these words were yelled every brave stood silent in his tracks. The next instant knives were plunged into the hearts of the two tortured girls, now nearer dead than living, their scalps torn off and their mutilated bodies each tossed over a broken limb of the Painted Tree, now rendered a thousand times more hideous and ghastly by its horrible load.

Then came a rallying yell from Lone Wolf, and his voice rung in thunder tones on the air.

"Rolling Thunder will ride to Apache-land. He will drive the horses like the north wind. Let the diablo Texasos come! Their cheeks will pale when they see Palo Pinto. The white dogs of the Brazos shall feel our knives. Vamonos!"

A wild scene of confusion, a mixed mob of snorting steeds, of fluttering feathers and glittering arms, and hideous paint-daubed faces! A sound of quick, prancing hoofs and low guttural ejaculations, and away like flying fiends swept Lone Wolf and his warriors toward the Brazos. Away to the west dashed Rolling Thunder with a dozen braves, driving the captured horses, shaking the very earth in a wild stampede.

Death, death in its most hideous form reigned at Palo Pinto. Two Texans, strong, hardy rancheros, hang, head downward from the bleached limb, the blood slowly dropping in dark pools beneath them, in the moon's ghastly light. An uncontrolled fascination would cause the observer to follow the snake-like stream of gore that ran down over the strange hieroglyphics on the trunk. Then, those two young girls, just budding into womanhood—God of justice! Art thou asleep? America! Where is thy boasted civilization?

Oh, ye red-tape manipulators and heads of martial departments, leave your cavalry at Carlisle Barracks, and take a pedestrian tour for your health upon the frontiers of long-suffering Texas; and if you don't make your heels fly, the reds can scalp you with a wooden spoon, brain you with the same, scoop out your calculating brain and dash it into a humming bird's eye, without causing the diminutive bird to wink!

It was some hours after the departure of the Apaches from Palo Pinto that the Rangers, accompanied by some of the surviving rancheros of the Fort Mason massacre, rode into the opening upon their fagged mustangs, within sight of the Painted Tree.

Early and late had they held fast to the trail; but the Indians, being able to change horses, had kept well in advance, notwithstanding the forced marches of the Rangers, who had confidently expected to have overtaken their foes, and would have done so, had it not been for the warning of their approach that had been given to Lone Wolf.

When these thirty determined Texans rode within the opening east of the skeleton tree, and saw by the moonlight that fearful spectacle upon its branches, every mustang was brought to his haunches by a quick jerk of the rein, and a deep groan came almost simultaneously from every lip.

"*Madre de Dios!* Gentlemen, we are too late!" exclaimed Ben Thompson. "The red devils have played their game to the bitter end."

Before Ben had ceased speaking, a number of the rancheros had spurred their horses frantically up to the Painted Tree, and amid soul-racking groans two of them sprung from their mustangs, the animals snorting in terror at the fearful sight and the smell of blood.

"Circle the tree!" yelled Reckless Joe. "Boys, we'll catch them yet. It is not too late for revenge!"

"You are right, Joe! Come on, boys," cried out Fighting Ben, "if Colonel Somers has settled on the Brazos, as the Mason men assert, you can bet that Lone Wolf has gone for the ranch on the jump, and we may be too late there, as here."

In circles the Rangers now galloped around the tree, and soon found the trails of both Rolling Thunder with the horses, and Lone Wolf, the latter pointing toward the Brazos.

This fact having been ascertained beyond a doubt, by a dismount and close examination, the Rangers returned in a body to the tree, beholding a sight that nerved their arms for heavier blows, urged them on to the trail of duty and revenge, and banished every thought of rest and food.

By the corpses of the murdered girls knelt two young men whose wives they were to have been. The faces of these Texans were as white as those of the dead, and as they raised their clinched hands heavenward, their lips moved, their forms trembled, and the hot tears coursed down their cheeks.

In all the rough, war-worn crowd, no eye was dry.

A wave of the hand, a signal from Fighting Ben, and all dismounted, leading their mustangs by the bridle-reins in a circle about the mourners and the dead.

"Gentlemen, Texans, Rangers!" he called out, "many of us have seen blood-curdling scenes, but none like that we are now forced to look upon. Swear with me, over these murdered maidens, that you will drown hunger and thirst, forget fatigue, and follow these fiends in human shape until we overtake them, even if we are compelled to go to the Apache villages beyond the Pecos!"

Up over the mutilated bodies were raised a circle of hands, and from throats, choked by their emotions, sounded in hoarse, deep meaning:

"We swear!"

"Stay and bury your dead, gentlemen," said Fighting Ben, feelingly, to the rancheros; then, turning to his comrades, he yelled:

"Mount and away! On, for the Brazos! On for vengeance. Death to Lone Wolf and his brutal band!"

A moment after, the Rangers were galloping, as fast as the fatigued condition of their animals would permit, through the shadows of the post-oaks, on the trail of Lone Wolf, leaving four rancheros to bury their dead beneath the bleached limbs of the ghastly Painted Tree.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THEY COME!

SINCE the capture of Ernest Somers, the settlers at the bend had increased their caution, and the herders had not dared to drive the stock as far from the corral as formerly, being confident that the band of Dark Dashwood was encamped in the vicinity, and the outlaws were constantly on the look-out to take advantage of any circumstance which would enable them to weaken the force of the corral, or to run off the stock.

Old Rocky, unable to control himself within the limits of the bend, often shouldered his rifle and wandered off in search of any sign of Indians who might, in coming down country, approach the settlement, or be guided thither by the outlaws.

Upon his last trip, he had taken his horse, intending to visit Palo Pinto; and his return was looked for with anxiety by all, for they had become dependent upon him in a great many ways. Indeed he was the acknowledged commander of the force of settlers; the colonel himself not choosing to make any plans of defense until the old scout had been consulted, and found to favor them.

Toward night, on the second day of Old Rocky's absence, Colonel Somers, in company with two of the herders, crossed the river and stationed themselves upon the bowlder to keep a look-out for the anticipated return of their friend.

Long years of anguish, caused by the loss of his only child, had left their mark on the face and form of the colonel; but the recent capture of his adopted son, doomed to such a fearful fate, together with the knowledge that his new home must undoubtedly be broken up, had changed his woe-begone and listless appearance.

He no longer brooded over his many troubles; his form was erect, his eyes blazed, and his limbs were in continual motion. In short, he was filled with an intense longing for revenge.

His words were few, and to the point; and none addressed him, except to answer a question, or when necessity demanded it.

Not more than ten minutes had the watchers occupied their position, when, to the southwest, the form of a man upon a horse was discernible; a mere speck which, as it drew near at terrific speed, was easily recognized as the scout, who also had a packed horse in the lead.

Fast came Old Rocky, in a straight course toward the bowlder; causing, by his great speed, much wonder in the minds of those who were eager to welcome him. But their wonder became tinged with apprehension, when he bounded into the bottom, and they saw that the extra horse had the dead body of an Indian lashed upon the saddle.

"How-dy, all on yer? Curn'l, shake!" exclaimed the scout, as he sprung from his mustang. "No time for gab. Jim, ride my nag round ther bend. Take t'other critter, ford ther river, leave 'em in ther corral, an' prepar' for biz. Ther reds is comin'. Let's h'ist ourselves over ther drink, an' git ready for concentrated cussedness. How does yer feel since I see'd yer last, curn'l?"

"I feel as if I should become insane if I don't have some chance for vengeance, and if it was not for the women I would be glad to see the red fiends come. Unless I have hope of seeing my children I care not to live; but while I do live, my time and energy shall be spent in seeking revenge upon those who have so brutally wronged me and mine."

"Don't fret, curn'l. Yer'll git all O. K., ef fight's what yer wants. I know we can't hold the bend ag'in' 'em long, an' we has got ter move ther weemin up ther creek, whar they'll

be safer nor hyer, an' whar ther 'Paches won't 'spect ter find 'em."

The last remark of Old Rocky was delivered as they reached the veranda. Col. Somers hesitated but a moment, and then entered the house, soon reappearing with his wife, Aunt Martha and the young ladies.

"You really think, Mr. Young," exclaimed Mrs. Somers, "that this removal is necessary? I should prefer to stay by my husband in any event."

"And I do not see much security, by ourselves, in the howling wilderness," said Aunt Martha.

"Oh, don't send us away!" pleaded Hattie and Mamie in chorus; "let us all die together."

The old scout, at first very much embarrassed, soon became decided.

"Ladies, hit are a thing I hes considered a heap, as I rid over ther parrarer, an' I sees no show for yer ef yer stays hyer. I hain't the leastest idee that we kin hold ther bend. Ther's a cave in ther bank o' ther river halt a mile upstream, whar I don't reckon ther devils 'll ever drap among yer, an' we'll jine yer thar when things gits too hot this-a-ways."

Seeing that their friend was decided, and relying upon his judgment, the females, with much reluctance, accompanied a detachment of the men, under his guidance, to the cave. Under the decisive orders of the scout the removal was effected, and all safely hidden in the cave, with Hattie and Mamie as guard at its entrance. Then the men returned and prepared for a stubborn defense of their homes.

All mustered there were eleven men, counting the negro, Jim, who had recovered from the rough treatment he had received at the hands of the outlaws.

Old Rocky ordered four men to guard the corral, and sent Dennis up on the bowlder to watch for the approach of the enemy. He then stationed two men on each side of the bend in the bottom timber, instructing them in the use of signals, which, when given, must bring them to any particular point where most needed. He then repaired to the veranda, with the colonel, to await developments.

It was now sunset, but still quite light, and the two hard-worked, anxious men had not been seated five minutes before a wild cry from Dennis, followed by a shot from his rifle, and he was seen immediately after to spring from the rock and swing himself to the safe side of the river.

The next instant there came a series of yells, and Dark Dashwood, with the remnant of his band, galloped in plain view of the settlers.

The outlaw waved his sombrero in the air, and cried out, with taunting voice:

"How-dy, John Somers! Once more I salute you! The next time you see me you will wish you had never been born, for I'll have a hundred red devils at my back, and sweep your whole tribe from the earth. The end is near. You will see the Dare-Devil of the Plains, the Buck of Santa Ana's Peak, before another sun. Adios! Vamonos!"

And, as quickly as they came, the outlaws spurred away over the prairie toward the Palo Pinto.

"I know'd ther cuss would git in w' ther reds," exclaimed Old Rocky: "an' we hain't got half ther show ter win ther we hed afore. But ef we see's ther thing air goin' ag'in' us, we hes got ter glide towards ther weemin an' babies. Everythin' air bunk 'bout ther powder-kegs. I reckon; hain't bit, curn'l!"

"Yes, my friend, I have no fears in regard to a regular charge. They cannot approach openly, only in the direction of the corral. That is our weakest point. Some spy of Dashwood's must have informed him of the coming of the Indians, and he now goes to meet them."

"Ther dog-goned renegade of a cuss of a kiote hev ben expectin' 'em all ther time. He left sign at ther Painted Tree ter fotch 'em this-a-ways, or we'd 'a' be'n safe enough. Ef we warn't so danged few, I'd send a man arter help, but bit's too late now, I reckon."

Dennis, who had returned to his post, now yelled again, and danced on the bowlder, gesticulating wildly for them to join him.

"Bloody murder! Will yees be after bid-in' down there be the cabin whin there's a lot of red devils comin' beyond on the perrara, ready till cut, shuffle, an' dale wid us at onct? Begorra, it's a nice, dacint foight they'll give us intirely. Come along, I say! Would yees l'ave Dinnis till murder thim all be himself?"

Col. Somers and Old Rocky soon stood upon the bowlder by the side of the much excited Irishman, and saw a sight that gave them little hope of life. A vast war-party of Indians were swooping down toward the bend, and the band of Dark Dashwood were speeding toward the savages.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DAY OF VENGEANCE.

BOTH parties soon met, and a short halt was made, after which the assailing party changed their course toward the river far above the settlement.

"Dashwood hev told 'em thar ain't no show

from this side ther drink," asserted the old scout.

The moon now arose, lighting up the night, which Old Rocky pronounced as one thing in favor of the settlers, for so large a body of savages could work to more advantage in the darkness. As it was, the besieged could use their rifles almost as well as by day, through the loopholes made for the purpose.

For an hour all was silent. Then a hasty ejaculation from the old scout caused all eyes to peer into the haze up-stream, where they saw the Apaches dash from the timber into the moonlit plain.

"Thar ain't more'n a third on 'em kep' a critter-back," said Old Rocky; "I kin see Dashwood an' his cut-throats along o' Lone Wolf an' about twenty sculpers on the'r mustangs. Don't throw a shot away. Here they come a-howlin'!"

It was certainly a terrible sight to the brave men behind the pickets, as they thought of their helpless wives and children, and saw the mixed cohort dashing toward them; the feathers of the savages flaunting, their arms glittering, and the war-paint showing plainly, while the air resounded with demoniac yells and war-whoops.

Just inside rifle range, they came to a sudden halt, and Dark Dashwood rode to the front.

"Surrender!" he cried, "and you shall all be spared, except Somers and his family and Old Rocky. Fire a shot, and every man, woman and child shall die. Show a white rag and save your lives!"

A volley from the settlers was the answer. A yell of fierce rage drowned the death cries as they all spurred out of range, and huddled together in council as to the next move.

Soon outlaws and Indians were drawn up in a low line facing the bend, and evidently waiting for the order to charge.

"Hyer come ther sneakin' cusses, boys. Grit yer teeth an' die game. Ef they crowd over ther fence, fire ther train, curn'l, an' then, all hands, git up an' git for ther swingin' lariat."

At this moment the Indians and outlaws dashed toward the fence, their war-cries filling the air, and, as they neared the corral, two score of dark forms sprung from the underbrush beneath the timber. Fast cracked rifle and revolver, the flashes lighting up faces that were desperate with hate, while death-cries sounded upon all sides.

"Now's yer time, curn'l! Boys, h'ist yerselves for the timber!" shouted Old Rocky.

The Texans sprung away from the position they had so ably defended, while Colonel Somers, standing by a corner of one of the herders' cabins, flashed a pistol toward the earth.

One bright, lurid flash heavenward, and the terrific thunder of the explosion burst upon the ears of the Texans, who turned to see the air filled with flying pickets and human forms, and to hear a yell of horror, agony and rage, mingled with the shrieks of wounded mustangs.

Now arose the maddened yells of Lone Wolf and Dark Dashwood ordering those who had escaped the explosion through the breach which it had made, and soon they dashed amid the rising smoke, falling each instant under the well-directed fire of the Texan rifles, as the settlers retreated by the cover of the bottom timber.

"Thank God we moved the women!" exclaimed Colonel Somers, as the Apaches rushed in and out of the deserted cabins, headed by Dashwood, cursing like a fiend, as the fact broke upon his mind that he had been outwitted.

"Be jabers!" shouted Dennis, "I knows a way till mix the red devils up worse nor they are;" and, before the Texans could prevent him, the Irishman rushed back to the corral and sprung over the pickets.

As the settlers kept up their galling fire, themselves for the time unnoticed, they wondered at the strange movements of Dennis, but only for an instant after his disappearance did his object remain a mystery, for suddenly the inner gate of the corral swung open, and out poured the affrighted animals in an overwhelming stampede.

To describe the confusion at this time would be impossible. The Indians were, many of them, trampled to the earth, and the wounded crushed into shapeless masses as the hundreds of frenzied beasts rushed wildly about the plain.

Many of the savages were driven into the bottom timber; and now a fierce hand to hand conflict raged between them and the Texans, who were prevented from further retreat by the river.

Full a score of Apaches were either killed or wounded by the explosion, trampled to death or shot; and the survivors, except those engaged in the bottom, were rushing wildly from cabin to cabin in the vain search for the women and children. Soon all were called together by a signal from Lone Wolf, who, with Dark Dashwood and some of the original mounted party, still kept their saddles. The result of the council was that half a dozen experienced trailers were dispatched through the bottom after the supposed fugitives.

But soon they were astonished, and rendered

for the moment helpless, by the Texan yell and the thunder of the gallant Rangers, headed by the Fighting Thompsons, in a grand charge, which shook the very earth. It struck terror to the hearts of the savage and the outlaw, but filled those of the little band of Texans with hope and joy, although many of their number lay already stiff in death.

With their backs to the trees, Old Rocky, Dennis, Jim and the colonel fought with a desperation which showed that they realized the thousand deaths in store for them if they should be captured; and, at the sign of confusion among their startled assailants, they cut down the Apaches before them, sprung into the limbs of the tree to which was attached the swinging lariat, and while the attention of the Indians was drawn toward the approaching Rangers, they all gained the opposite side of the river and opened fire upon their foes below.

"Shoot down the last one of the red butchers of women and babes!" yelled Fighting Ben Thompson, as he led the charge, fairly riding over the bewildered Apaches and sending wholesale death into their ranks.

Amid the terror-stricken yells, death-shrieks and fusillades of six-shooters, Dark Dashwood, and Lone Wolf and a number of the savages sprung over the bank and escaped up the stream, leaving their followers to continue the fight without leaders.

But not long did the sounds of battle hover over the bend. It was too fierce to last, and no force like theirs could stand the furious charge of the Rangers, maddened by the fearful sight at Palo Pinto.

In ten minutes, outlaw and Indian who had stood their ground lay dead upon the sward, while the cheers of the gallant Rangers rung exultantly upon the air.

"I fear we came too late to do much good, boys," said Ben Thompson, "although I don't see the bodies of any women or children. Hallo! Old Rocky, is that you?"

"Reckon it air what's left on me," answered the old scout, in a husky voice, as he approached in company with his three comrades. "Ben, I'm dog-goned glad ter see yer. Boys, ye'd orter 'a' got hyer before, ter hev saved more o' our crowd. This air Curn'l Somers, what ther cussed reds an' Dark Dashwood has purty well bu'sted up."

"God bless you, gentlemen!" said the colonel, in a broken voice, "but we have no time to talk. The fiends may find the women and children, and murder them. You see, gentlemen, we hid them in a cave up stream, and lucky we did, or they would all have been butchered now."

"Yar mighty right 'bout hit, every way, curn'l. Ben, yer had better camp hyer, an' we'll fetch ther weemin," advised the old scout, as he turned toward the opening in the fence, to be suddenly brought to a halt in horror, by two rifle-shots that broke upon the night, from up the river.

"Great God! They are murdering the women!" cried Colonel Somers in an agonized voice, as he bounded like a madman up the Brazos.

"On, boys, on! Kill your horses, but save the women and children!" yelled Fighting Ben, as they all dashed madly through the breach, and up the margin of the bottom timber.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAZEPPA.

WHEN Child-of-the-Sun with her retinue reached the Colorado river, they struck it just below Ebbell's Creek, and there camped.

Up to this time they had followed the train of Lone Wolf; but now, fearing to venture further on the same course, they struck out in a northerly direction, leaving Fort Chadbourne toward the east, and eventually camping on the Clear Fork of the Brazos, a day's ride from Fort Phantom Hill.

Although the Apache prophetess and her maids had crossed many Comanche trails between the Colorado and their present camp, they had not, thus far, come in contact with any of the war-parties of this nomadic tribe.

Awakening from a refreshing sleep the morning after their arrival, Child-of-the-Sun glanced about the bottom timber beneath which they were encamped.

The branches of the towering timber were alive with thousands of birds, each seeming to vie with each other in their songs of joy, as the bright rays of the sun filtered through the foliage in tiny golden arrows.

Springing upright upon her couch of skins, she threw the long masses of golden hair over her shoulders with her hands, and several of her maids sprung joyously to her side.

Child-of-the-Sun smiled her thanks to her kind and considerate attendants, as some prepared breakfast, while others gathered flowers for their mistress, and still others spread a circle of robes upon the spot where they were intending to eat, beneath the drooping vines and flowers.

The feast went on, accompanied by the song of birds and flute like laughter, mingling with

the ripple of the stream and the dreamy breathings of the zephyr breeze.

Suddenly, delicate hands, half raised to mouth, stop in air, the light laugh dies half-uttered, and bright eyes are filled with dread, as they look each at the other, the blood flying from cheek to heart.

What has changed the beautiful scene thus, to be quickly followed by upright positions and glances of increased alarm cast toward the plain to the eastward?

At first, there was heard but the snort and prancing of a mustang, but this was quickly followed by a piercing shriek. It seemed like that of a horse, long tortured by hunger and thirst, and long lost from his kind, which he now recognized with maddened brain. The horses of the Apache maidens dash frantically into the bottom timber. Another shriek breaks on their ears, as their mustangs vanish; the sound apparently not more than a hundred yards away.

Heroically the maidens gather about Child-of-the-Sun, with half-bent bows, standing between her and the strange alarm. Their forms were half crouching, their lips parted, and their eyes gleaming, not in fear, but in menace and defiance.

With folded arms the Apache Queen awaited the denouement.

The sound of hoofs nears the barrier. The Apache ponies give a wild neigh of welcome, that is answered by a scream so piercing and unearthly, that the hands grasped the bows more tightly as it burst into view.

Just as the last scream cut the air, high up over the barrier of bushes arose a horse in a mad, desperate leap, wavered an instant quivering in the air, and then fell prone upon the very robe on which Child-of-the-Sun had, a moment before, been seated. The limbs of the horse are torn, and covered with froth and gore; while, bound upon its back, is the body of a man.

For a moment only did the scene maintain the character of a tableau. Waving her hand, as quickly as she comprehended the position of affairs, Child-of-the-Sun, said, with a voice of mingled joy and pity:

"Look! The Good Spirit has sent a brother to Child-of-the-Sun. His skin is the same as hers. Cut loose the ropes before his spirit flies back to the clouds!"

For the first time the maidens seem to hesitate before obeying the commands of their young mistress. During the moment of hesitation, the head of the dying horse sunk lower and lower, bringing into view a face, deathlike, but fairer than any that the Apache maids remembered to have beheld. But the face was pinched with horror, hunger, thirst and despair.

Quick flashes a knife through the cruel cords, and the Mazeppa of the Brazos slides limp and to all appearance dead, down upon the panther-skin of the Apache Queen.

A faint pulsation of the heart and a nervous twitching of the eyelids give hope that life may not be escaping. Child-of-the-Sun causes her maidens to fly here and there. A soft couch of robes is made at the foot of a tree, a canopy of green branches is raised over it, and by this time the stranger shows more signs of life.

The look of horror that at the first, seemed fixed, soon gave place to one of mingled wonder and admiration. Were it not for the lightning-like darts of pain through his frame, he would doubtless have thought, as the maidens moved him from the vicinity of the dead mustang, that the animal had borne him to another world.

Among the Apaches there is some knowledge of herbs, gathered from the Mexicans; and the torn and bruised man, still unable to utter a word, is bandaged with healing leaves and roots, and within an hour from the time that the shriek of the death-stricken horse had startled the maidens, he was slumbering peacefully.

It is needless to state, that he who sleeps, surrounded by semi-savage beauties, is our young friend Ernest Somers, who had been doomed to a horrible death by Dark Dashwood, the Outlaw Chief.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CAPTIVES OF THE CAVE.

CROUCHING in the cave, the women and children huddled together after the departure of their male protectors, and listened in fear and trembling for any sounds of war from the direction of the bend; listened until the minutes seemed hours, and the frightened children had sobbed themselves to sleep. Just below them flowed the dark waters of the Brazos, and through the timber could be seen the plain beyond.

Seated upon two rocks within the mouth of the cave were Hattie and Mamie, both grasping their rifles, and determined to defend themselves and those who were under their care. Mrs. Somers and Aunt Martha had all their attention taken up by the anxious wives and mothers of the herders.

"Thank God, the children are asleep," said Aunt Martha, as the sounds of battle were borne upon the breeze in their direction.

"Oh, Heaven! What will become of us!" broke out Mrs. Somers in agony. "These

brutal savages will overpower and murder every one at the settlement!"

"Don't fear, mother," said Hattie encouragingly; "our people have oaken posts to protect themselves, and are accustomed to savage warfare."

"I wish," said Mamie, in a trembling voice, "I could feel as confident as you do. But I have had the most dreadful forebodings of late."

"Stand firm, Mamie," said Hattie, bravely, as the din of battle grew louder below; "the stragglers will certainly come this way, if defeated, for many of them have left their horses but a short distance above."

Here she was interrupted by the thunder of the explosion, which sounded so suddenly that all gave a scream of affright.

"Mother," cried Hattie, excitedly. "I know that our people have been driven to the cabins, and are in danger of extermination, or they would not have fired the mine."

The volleys of rifle-shots and the yells of the savages had been plainly heard by the occupants of the cave before the explosion, and now an almost endless rattle of arms sounded, amid which a strange yell, seemingly of many in concert, struck their ears and greatly puzzled them. At this the children awoke, screaming.

"Oh, mother!" cried Hattie, in apprehension; "do try and quiet those children, or we are lost!"

At that moment just in front of the entrance to the cave, but on the opposite side of the river, stood an Indian, his eyes glittering like those of a wild beast, and a long gleaming knife in his hand.

Quickly his strong, bronzed arms parted the dark waters, and the tufted head soon appeared on the bank near the trail to their retreat.

Another savage form parted the bushes, another splash of the waters; and the terrified girls with fixed eyes gazed upon their dread foes beneath them.

One instant thus; then the spell was broken, as the first fierce-painted fiend pressed the bank, and Hattie exclaimed bravely:

"Sister, remember that we protect innocent babes! Shoot the brute in the river!" And as coolly as if firing at a squirrel, the rifle of Hattie Somers was leveled at the savage who was now bounding up the bank.

A lurid flash, a loud report, and the Apache brave fell back into the river.

Another, and a gurgling cry mingled with the waters and the death-struggles of the swimmer: "Thank God!"

The words were but spoken, when the lips that uttered them were benumbed with horror; as, with flendish cries, a dozen braves strike the water with a single splash, followed by a white man, whom they recognized as Dark Dashwood. Their despairing prayers are soon interrupted.

"Hold, Lone Wolf! Remember our council-talk! Save my game for the torture-stake!"

With these words, Dark Dashwood sprang into the cave, and dripping with water.

"These are my birds," he said, designating the ladies of the Somers household. "We will take them to the mountains."

So saying, assisted by three savages, Dark Dashwood dragged the shrieking women from the cave, and up the bank to where the horses were concealed.

The shrieks of the women that remained, as their babes were brained against the rocks before their eyes, and then their own cries, as their scalps were torn from their heads, and the knives of the Apaches pierced their hearts, were sounds never to be forgotten.

Only a moment, but in that moment was concentrated an amount of horror, the memory of which would last as long as life should endure, and then the captives found themselves bound upon snorting steeds, and surrounded by blood-stained demons, and led by Lone Wolf, who gave a rallying cry as they sprang upon their mustangs, and went bounding at headlong speed over the plain; thus on they went, leaving behind them friends who were now flying, panting with exertion and dread, through the woods to their relief at the cave, where they would find nothing but horror and death!

CHAPTER XXX. TO THE RESCUE.

"HATTIE! Mamie!" cried Colonel Somers in an agony of apprehension at the solemn silence that hovered over the bottom as he approached the cave.

"Great God in Heaven! They are butchered!" he exclaimed, as he staggered up the path, Old Rocky dashing past him into the cavern.

An instant the old scout stood at the entrance to the cave, gazing inside; then, covering his face with his hands, he reeled against a boulder.

"Don't speak, my friend! Don't tell me anything!" said the colonel, in a husky voice.

"Mother! Mamie! Hattie! Where are you?" But his voice rung back in a mocking echo as he peered into the dark and silent depths.

A heavy groan brought the scout from the chaos of misery back to a part realization of what must be done, just as the Fighting Thompsons and Reckless Joe sprang to his side.

"What's up, Rocky? Are we too late again?"

Getting no reply from the old scout, Ben sprang into the cave. One look at the ghastly forms of mothers and children, and he dashed out, exclaiming:

"Hunt the trail, boys! Look that side of the river! They've murdered the women and children! We must follow the Apaches beyond the Pecos!"

Then, grasping the colonel by the arm, he said:

"Colonel Somers, I know that you are most deeply wronged, and have had more misery heaped upon you than a score of men usually have, but brace up; we'll fight for you as long as we can straddle a mustang or stand upon our feet."

"We'll have Dark Dashwood's Life for it, if it takes years of hunting," said Fighting Bill, as he stood, with folded arms, surrounded by the other Rangers, and looked down upon the dead.

"The trail leads west," called out Reckless Joe, returning from the bank where he had been looking for signs; "they have left about twenty of the mustangs behind, and there must have been some thirty warriors, who escaped with the captives."

"Gentlemen," said Ben, "this calls for immediate action, but it is impossible for us to start to-night. Col. Somers, how many horses had you before the stampede?"

"About thirty-five, Mr. Thompson."

"Well," returned Ben, "I have planned things in my mind, I think, to suit the case. From the character of the Apaches, I am confident they will not harm the captives until after crossing the Pecos. If they did not intend them for the torture they would have brained them here, for they took them at considerable risk and trouble. We will bury the dead here, and after we are straightened up we will take a fresh mount from your stock and start upon the trail early. When we reach the Pecos we will have plenty of work ahead. I suppose, colonel, you realize the many difficulties of this trip. Does my plan suit you?"

"Mr. Thompson, my head is so wild with torturing thoughts, born of the perils of my loved ones, that I am scarce capable of reasoning. I leave all to you, and trust implicitly to your judgment."

"All right, colonel! I'll do the best I know how. We'll save them, if there is any way open to play such a game. We're the boys that will win, or die trying."

A small chamber was found leading off from the main cave, and in this the women and children were tenderly and reverently laid. The bodies of the herders were also brought from the bend and laid by the side of their wives and little ones, after which the entrance was walled up with stones, and the sad rites of sepulture were over.

The bend was a busy scene for the remainder of the night, a part of the Rangers preparing food for the long scout, while others snatched a little sleep and then relieved their comrades.

At sunrise, fully equipped, and mounted upon fresh horses which had been driven in from the plain, the Rangers and their friends forded the river and started on the trail of Lone Wolf, Dennis McCafferty and the negro, Jim, remaining in charge of the ranch, the former avowing that he could "run the ranch an' take care of the stock alone, an' he'd rather make the trial nor be disconcerting about the country afther red haythens!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEARER NEMESIS.

AGAIN we pass the towering basaltic portals of the Apache valley which stretches from base to base of the gigantic adamantine mountains.

There is no sign of its being inhabited—no living thing is seen within its limits.

There are but half a dozen lodges standing, the others being packed up beneath the shelter of one of them. Not a laugh nor the lightest word is heard in all the hideous gathering. A dark cloud seems to hover over the denizens of the gorge.

Why is this?

Because Child-of-the-Sun has long since disappeared. Not a trace of her has been discovered, and the time has come for the return of the much-feared chief, Lone Wolf.

The squaws dare not ask themselves what he will say. Therefore it is with gloomiest apprehensions that they hear afar off a long-drawn yell. It is not a shout of victory. They know that Lone Wolf approaches the valley, but that death has claimed many of the braves who followed him.

All this is plain to them before they see those who gave the signal of approach and death, and the minds of the waiting squaws are filled with mingled hope and fear.

They have not long to wait. Once more the wild weird wail echoes from cliff to cliff, and all who remain alive of the war-party of Lone Wolf ride into the beautiful valley.

By the side of the hideous chief rides Dark Dashwood, a look of brutal ferocity on the faces of both; the former expressing, in addition, a

wondering surprise that Child-of-the-Sun comes not out to welcome him.

In the center of the cavalcade are the Brazos captives, bound to their horses. Mrs. Somers appears more dead than living. Aunt Martha tries to look hopeful and to cheer her companion. Hattie is defiant and scornful, endeavoring to instill hope into the mind of her sister.

The snake-like eyes of Lone Wolf glance with surprise and suspicion about the valley. Another ominous yell breaks from the Apache horde. This time it is answered by the aged squaws, in a wail more wild and horrible than that of the braves.

Jerking his mustang to his haunches, the Apache chief exclaimed, in a voice of rage:

"Why does not Child-of-the-Sun come to meet Lone Wolf? Does she know that many Apache braves have sung their death-songs? She has said that Lone Wolf would see Child-of-the-Sun again. His eyes are open. He sees her not. Is she afraid of her chief?"

These words were thrown out in a rapid and vehement manner. Then the oldest of the squaws spoke in a voice of reverence, her eyes uplifted:

"Child-of-the-Sun has gone home to the clouds. The Good Spirit has called her. Lone Wolf will see her no more."

With a cry like that of a suddenly wounded beast, the Apache chief raised his rifle, and sent the bar of steel crashing through the skull of the old squaw who had communicated to him more maddening intelligence than if she had informed him of the complete annihilation of his tribe.

He knew in an instant that she had started in search of her parents. Although he had every faith in her powers as a prophetess, he knew that it was impossible for her to have vanished in any other way, or from other motives.

The sounds that now filled the gorge as the squaws of those who had been killed were made aware of their fate, turned the little village into a pandemonium. During the confusion that followed, Spotted Leopard, with his braves, dashed down the valley driving the vast herd stolen from Fort Mason by a forced detour, on account of a scarcity of water.

Lone Wolf, feeling the necessity of increasing the number of his warriors, sent a runner to a neighboring village whose chief had recently been killed, making an offer of many horses to the braves if they would come and fill his decimated ranks.

This done, a dozen braves were ordered to select horses from those brought in by Rolling Thunder, and to hold themselves in readiness to accompany him on the following morning to the Pecos, in quest of Child-of-the-Sun and the maidens who had disappeared along with her.

Thus, through his intense passion and respect for the youthful queen of his tribe, Lone Wolf postponed the torture of his Brazos captives, and gave the pursuing Texans time to reach the Apache mountains before the fearful death to which their friends were doomed was brought about.

Seated upon his horse, Dark Dashwood watched each movement of the Indians, realizing that he now stood alone amid savages, a man proscribed for his crimes, and banished from those of his own race. He also saw that he could not here exercise the arbitrary power which had been his habit among his own men, all of whom were now dead.

He must now join this savage tribe. He must paint and dress as an Apache.

Lone Wolf was in such a maddened state that Dashwood dared not urge on the torture of the captives or propose what was in his mind. He could wish that one exception be made to the general doom to which he had assented. Hattie Somers's defiant manner had captivated him on the march, and now that Goldie Somers had escaped, he resolved to claim the former as his squaw upon his adoption into the tribe. He must save her in some way. His former plan was to claim Child-of-the-Sun, whose great beauty and influence had been so much spoken of by Lone Wolf, but she was gone. When he should become chief he would recapture her. Not one of the Somers family should escape his vengeance.

He watched the Indians as they secured the captives in a painful position upon the ground, with much satisfaction, and spoke taunting words to Mrs. Somers, reminding her of his threatened revenge in the days long past when she had scorned his love.

He listened with joy when Lone Wolf ordered a runner to go for reinforcements; then he slid from his horse and contrasted in thought the difference in his position which the last few days had made. He was now forced to care for his own horse amid the wild, savage uproar made by the howling squaws, and the excitement occasioned by the arrival of the large herd of stolen stock.

All the satisfaction gained by revenge so far, was nothing compared to the loneliness he felt, thus isolated from men of his own color and language; and the outlaw chief rolled himself in his blanket as far as he could from the hellish tumult, to seek forgetfulness in slumber. But in his dreams were conjured up fearful, un-

natural shapes claiming his close acquaintance; and which brought deep groans of fear and horror from his lips, causing the cold beads of perspiration to stand upon his forehead, and bringing closer a foretaste of that hell to which his soul would soon be banished to everlasting torture.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE DISCOVERY.

WHEN Ernest Somers awoke from his slumber, the day had passed, and dark shadows of night filled the bottom timber.

During his fearful journey he had often been in an insane maze, half sleep, half trance, and for hours at a time unconscious of his true position.

His limbs had been cramped, the circulation stagnated, and for hours at a time he had suffered all that a strong, healthy man could endure, and yet live.

But now, as he opened his eyes, he experienced feelings so strongly contrasted with his former condition that it is little wonder he thought himself in Paradise. But a burning thirst caused the green shades and cool night breeze to have a tantalizing effect upon him, and he turned toward the stream, guided by the sound of its waters; but the pain caused by his slightest movement brought a realization of his past dread experience, and a deep groan burst from his lips.

The sweet flute-like voice that now floated musically to his ears, was in consonance with the form and face that had first broke upon his vision.

"*Gracias a Dios!*"

This ejaculation, followed by the touch of a soft warm hand upon his forehead, sent an electric thrill through his frame. Who was this fair being? Who were these wood nymphs that were hovering between his resting-place and the lurid light of the fire?

The delicate hand that rested upon his brow was flesh and blood; the cool drink that was held to his fevered lips was of nature's distillery. This was no hallucination.

Ernest eagerly drank the water, and looked his gratitude into the limpid blue eyes that met his unflinchingly.

Was the hand withdrawn? No. The rosy digits clung to his own, the blue eyes filled with tears, and Child-of-the-Sun, as if knowing that the sufferer could not understand the Apache language, spoke softly in the Spanish tongue which she had learned from the Mexican captives.

"White chief has had a long sleep. He will live. Can he tell where is his home?"

Ernest Somers, while living on the Guadalupe, had learned sufficient Spanish from the Mexican herders to understand her question; and, in a husky voice, scarce above a whisper, he answered:

"I was bound on the horse by bad white men. My home is many days' ride to the East."

"It is many days' ride to the home of the White Chief. His squaw will moan and howl when he comes not back," said Child-of-the-Sun.

"White chief has no squaw," he replied; "but his mother and sisters will be filled with sorrow. How came Golden Hair upon the plains? Her skin is not dark."

"Child-of-the-Sun is the Queen of the Apaches," answered the maiden, proudly; "she has been many moons with Lone Wolf beyond the mountains. She has left them. She rides to find her own people who wept for her when the red-men stole her from her father's home."

"Great God! I thank Thee!" exclaimed Ernest. "It must be her at last!" He sprung to a sitting posture upon his couch, regardless of the sharp pains which made him cringe with the torture, and grasped both her hands to the great wonderment of the Mexican maidens.

Withdrawing them gently, Child-of-the-Sun glided swiftly to her own couch, and returned with the musical-box, passing it to the eager hands of Ernest who, turning it over quickly, saw the name of Goldie Somers engraved upon it.

"Again, oh, God, I thank Thee! All my sufferings are as nothing compared with the blessing derived from them. Dark Dashwood, the best deed you ever did was when you bound me upon the wild horse. Little did you think your cruel act would be the means of bringing together again the parents and child long lost to each other."

During these excited mutterings of their guest, which were delivered in English, and therefore unintelligible to them, Child-of-the-Sun and her maids stood, looking upon him in wonder and concern. Then, pleadingly he held out his hands toward the beautiful girl, and said, in imperfect Spanish:

"Goldie Somers, your father and mother have been my dearest friends. I was with them when captured by the same bad white man who hired Lone Wolf to steal you from your home on the Guadalupe. They are the only parents I have ever known."

Child-of-the-Sun pressed her hands upon her

brow, and murmured with a far-away look in her eyes:

"Goldie Somers—Guadalupe,—" and smiled, as if pleasant memories were fitting through her mind. Then, placing both hands within those of Ernest, trustingly, she added:

"Child-of-the-Sun will go with the White Chief. She has come many sleeps to find those whom she has seen in her dreams."

Then, turning to her maids, she continued:

"Look! The Good Spirit has sent the White Chief to the camp of Child-of-the-Sun. He will go on the long path where the sun comes. He will show the long path where the sun comes. He will show the lodges where the pale-faces live. Daughters of the Apache-land will go. They will be welcome. Child-of-the-Sun will be at her home. Her home shall be the home of those whom she loves."

The Apache prophetess ceased speaking. Her maids sprung to the fire, and brought to Ernest the refreshments they had been preparing, of which he ate with a keen appetite; often looking toward Goldie Somers, and showing in his face the deep joy he felt in the discovery he had made in regard to her parentage, thanking from his heart his worst enemy for having sent him, even through a hell of suffering, as it had ended in giving him an opportunity of returning a long-lost child to her long-suffering parents.

Again weakened nature succumbed to sleep, and Ernest Somers, pale and silent as a corpse, lay upon the panther-skins within a circle of half savage beauties, who watched his slumbers until they themselves at length reclined, lulled to sleep by the rippling river beneath the slow swaying vines and lofty trees. The howling, snapping wolves that fought over the dead horse, and the flap of countless buzzards that were drawn from all points of the compass by a strange and incomprehensible instinct, disturbed not these children of Nature who had been from infancy accustomed to such sounds of the night.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RECONNOITERING.

LUCKILY for all concerned, the Rangers, with Old Rocky as their guide, left the regular trail to the Pecos Ford, and struck northerly, knowing that they could not approach the Apache retreat from that direction without being seen by the Indians who were posted on the rocks at the entrance to the valley.

Had the Rangers crossed at the Indian ford they would have encountered Lone Wolf and his braves, who were in search of some sign of Child-of-the-Sun.

From the base of the mountains, on one side of the gorge where they were now encamped, boiled a cool spring, which was fully appreciated after their long and rapid ride over the arid plains.

Although all had suffered greatly, no word of complaint passed their lips, and a stern determination was frozen upon their features, which showed that the horrible scenes which they had witnessed were continually before their eyes.

Grouped together upon the grass, they broke their fast without camp-fires, as the smoke would endanger their safety. Nothing could be done in the way of reconnoitering until darkness; and for some hours after their arrival, they threw themselves upon their blankets for the repose they so much needed. It was while most of the band were thus sleeping, that Reckless Joe, who had charge of the guard at the entrance of the gorge, rushed up and exclaimed:

"Where's Old Rocky? There's a big war-party of Reds, just out on the plain, riding southwards."

The old scout, with a muttered exclamation of surprise, sprung after Joe as he returned to the mouth of the gorge, while every Ranger bounded to his feet and prepared for conflict.

Old Rocky was absent but a short time, however, when he returned, greatly excited, and addressed himself to his comrades:

"Boys, ther wustest kind o' luck are a-follerin' us. Ther are nigh onter fifty dahged 'Paches glidin' past ter jine Lone Wolf. I reckon ther cuss sent for 'em, bein' ez how we purty much cleaned him out o' fighters."

"Do you think," asked Colonel Somers, anxiously, "that they have harmed the captives yet?"

"Colonel, ef I'd 'a' thunk that, I wouldn't 'a' stopped hyerabouts a minit. What I'm about now are dangerous, but I'm goin' ter risk hit. I've done ther same trick afore, an' I reckon I kin git ther lay o' things so ez ter gi'n us a better show ter-night, for ter-morrer's sun 'll shine on ther weemin free, or Old Rocky 'll be ez dead ez a door-nail, an' without ha'r."

"You'll be very careful, Rocky," cautioned the colonel, "for much depends upon your knowledge and judgment."

"Don't yer fret, colonel; Old Rocky knows his biz."

"Remember," put in Fighting Ben, "that we shall all anxiously await your return, and that we are ready at any moment for a charge into the Apache stronghold."

"Yes," added Daring Bill, "we're spoiling for a chance at them. This will be our third

play, and that always wins. We're bound not to be too late this trip."

"We'll tap Lone Wolf's bank," said Ben, "and spoil his chances of ever opening another game. He'll be a dead wolf before another sun kisses the Apache peaks."

By the time Ben had ceased speaking the old scout had disappeared among the rough crags of the side of the mountain, on his way to its summit, where he knew he could get a view of the Apache valley. Reaching the desired point, he gazed long and earnestly, hoping to discover the captives, who had for some time been the dearest friends he had ever known in his rough life.

The captives, however, were not to be seen; and Old Rocky, knowing they must be concealed near at hand, watched every movement below, until at last he was rewarded by observing some of the squaws, who were erecting the lodges on the old site of the Apache camp, dragging the same from beneath the cottonwoods.

Close scrutiny enabled him to locate the place where the captives must be secured in the little gorge. Satisfied in this, he now endeavored to plan some means of reaching them, and rejoiced to see that the mountains in that vicinity were more easy to scale than the peak which he had just surmounted.

As the old scout gave a grunt of satisfaction at this most important discovery, his attention was attracted by loud yells; and straight in the entrance to the valley he saw the war-party of mounted Apaches which had been reported by Reckless Joe, on their way to the camp of Lone Wolf.

As they galloped up to the clear space before the lodges, a yell of welcome rung out and echoed through the valley, and the sound of the tum-tum filled the air.

Lone Wolf advanced to meet them, with palms presented, in token of friendship, while every brave thrust his lance-point into the sward to denote the same sentiment.

Buffalo-robos were spread for the strangers, and food brought them by some of the squaws; and the scout now noticed that a crowd of the aged hags were approaching, bearing four peeled posts, which were shortly set into the earth, some six feet apart, and within the crescent.

The sight of them caused Old Rocky to grind his teeth with rage and to tremble with apprehension, for he well knew the fearful use for which they were intended.

It was now late in the afternoon, and immediate steps must be taken to save the captives.

From his knowledge of Indian customs, the old scout had no doubt that the coming night would be taken to celebrate the arrival of reinforcements, and that the torture of the captives would wind up the hideous orgies of the occasion.

With these dread thoughts which, as he lingered, watched and reasoned, became certainties, Old Rocky realizing the necessity for immediate action, made his way rapidly back to camp, where the Rangers and Colonel Somers awaited his return with an anxiety painful to bear.

"Well, my good old friend," cried out the latter with trembling lips, as the old scout was once more in their midst; "what success? Have you seen or heard anything?"

"I knows about whar they bees, curn'l. Ther weemin is in a little gorge whar lets outen ther valley s'uth'ard, an' thar is some cottonwoods a-standin' at ther mouth, whar we kin crawl in ter from ther rocks, an' drap down by watchin' our chances. I reckon by ther way they is fixin' things, that big b'ilin' o' reds 'll hev a high-falutin' old time ter-night. Hit'll be a more scrumptious barbecue nor they thinks, ef we carries out ther programmes I has planned it. Half ev yer mount yer rags, an' glide ter ther openin' o' ther valley. Leave yer critters bid till yer kin scot up, an' git among 'em. Ef yer hears my yell mixed up with ther reds, just fce a shot ter draw some ev 'em down toward ther valley, and we uns 'll hev a better show for biz. Don't try ter wipe out ther guard until hit are dark. Now which ev yer air goin' ter skip over ther rocks with ther ole man?"

"I shall certainly go with you, Rocky," exclaimed Colonel Somers.

"And I, and I!" rung through the crowd; but the old scout selected ten men, and left the others, among whom were the Fighting Thompsons and Reckless Joe, to attack the Apache camp from the entrance to the valley, according to the judgment of the three last-named Rangers.

Arms and ammunition were put in order for the desperate work ahead, and everything that was not absolutely necessary was left in their camp.

"Member, boys, if they crowds us hard at ther cottonwoods, ter h'ist yerselves on ter yer critters, an' come a-b'ilin'." Then do yer best towards wipin' out ther red cusses. We'll take keer o' ther weemin, or lose our h'ar."

Just at dusk the mounted Rangers rode out from the gorge and proceeded eastward, in the shadows of the cliff toward the entrance to the valley, while Old Rocky, with Colonel Somers and the other Rangers who had been selected

by him, ten in number, grasped their rifles and started to climb up the difficult and dangerous mountain peak southward; curving their course after some clambering, toward the east, and the vicinity of the little gorge, where the captives lay bound to the earth in painful positions, the cords cutting into their flesh, they having but little hope of ever again seeing those whom they loved, or their distant home.

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE PLAY BEGINS.

As darkness settled over the Apache mountains a score of huge fires were kindled by the squaws, illuminating the crescent of lodges and the smooth plot of sward which stretched opposite the village.

In the little gorge all was darkness, and the captives lay bound, and broken in spirit, guarded by two braves detailed especially for that duty.

Little did they suppose that not two hundred yards up the steep mountain-side were determined men, among whom were Col. Somers, silently climbing over the crags, taking every advantage of bush and boulder, and making their way toward the cottonwoods that chafed against the mountain.

Listening for a moment after gaining a secure position, Old Rocky distinctly heard the groans of the women, and grated his teeth in desperation. While he was meditating further plans for their rescue, the fiendish yells of the Indians burst out a new, and the attention of the entire party was drawn to the illuminated space within the crescent of lodges.

Near a hundred braves, in war-paint, feathers, and all their beastly decorations, were circling around in a wild dance, gesticulating and howling. Within this hideous circle of whirling demons, stood the four torture-stakes, and in the center stood Dark Dashwood stripped to the skin, with Lone Wolf standing near at hand.

"Warriors of the Pecos! Lone Wolf is glad!" So rung out the voice of the Apache chief. "He has found new friends. When his braves fall before the fast-shooting guns of the diablo Texans, warriors come thick around his lodge. Our poles bend with the scalps of the pale-face dogs. But Lone Wolf is sad. When he went on the war-path, Child-of-the-Sun was in the valley. She has gone like the wind toward the morning sun. Lone Wolf has seen her trail. Before you is a great chief. He is the brother of Lone Wolf, but his skin is white. He will put on paint. He will be an Apache. His braves have all gone on the long dark trail."

At a signal from the speaker, two young braves rushed from a lodge, and in a short time Dark Dashwood was smeared from head to foot with clay and buffalo marrow. The outlaw was then quickly clothed in Apache war-dress, and his face hideously streaked with vermilion bars, and stripes of blue on his forehead and cheeks.

Once more the savages whirled in their mad dance, this time joined by Dark Dashwood and Lone Wolf. The lurid flames amid which moved these dancing demons presented a picture that would never be effaced from the minds of the watching Texans as long as life lasted.

"Curn'l," said Old Rocky, in a husky voice, "pass ther word for all ther boys ter fasten ther lariats onter ther limbs, an' be ready ter drap when I gives ther word. Boys, lay clost!" he hoarsely whispered, as he and the colonel crawled to the trunk of the tree, and secured the ends of the lariats. A low hiss, and a signal for silence, and both men slid rapidly down the ropes, their forms being hidden by the trunks of the huge cottonwoods.

Directly north of their position was the entrance to the gorge where the light from the fires cast a glow, and the attention of the sentinels was now drawn in that direction by the increased tumult.

A pressure of the hand, and Old Rocky and the colonel drew their bowies, and then half-bent they glided swiftly toward the two Apache braves, the groans of the women stimulating them to double caution and strength.

The hands of both men grasped the neck of an Indian at the same instant. A heavy thud quickly followed this movement. Then a spurt of blood; and with gurgling cries, smothered by tightened fingers, the dead Apache sentinels were thrown aside.

An instant later and the same knives severed the cruel cords that had worn into the flesh of the suffering captives.

It was no time for explanations.

"Curn'l, freeze ter yor wife, and stampede for ther cottonwoods quicker'n greased lightning!"

A fresh round of fierce yells sounded from the valley, which caused the two men to spring forward toward the trees, bearing Mrs. Somers and Aunt Martha, Hattie and Mamie bravely refusing to be taken first.

With a hasty hiss to the Rangers, the old scout fastened the ends of the lariat to the women who were at once hauled up; and, by the time the lariats were again lowered, Hattie and Mamie had been brought under the trees, and were also drawn up to a place of safety.

Once more the voice of Lone Wolf broke on the listening ears in a loud, exultant roar.

"Your ears shall hear sweet music! It shall come from the white squaws. The torture fire shall make them dance and howl. Their death-yells shall be heard beyond the clouds. Our braves who have gone on the long dark trail will hear them and laugh. They will know that Lone Wolf has not forgotten them. Bring the white squaws. Dark Dashwood takes one to his lodge. The others die the long death at the torture-stake. Lone Wolf has spoken."

CHAPTER XXXV. AVENGED.

As Lone Wolf ceased speaking, four warriors sprung toward the little gorge.

"Member what depends on yer steel, curn'l," whispered Old Rocky, as he made ready for the desperate encounter. "Ready thar wi' yer lariats!"

And with a hiss of caution both men grasped their knives.

A lightning-like play of steel was driven to the hilt in the breasts of the two braves in advance; and, before those in the rear could comprehend what had occurred, the still dripping bowies clove their hearts.

Hand over hand went the colonel and the scout, as they scrambled into the foliage, and drew up the lariats.

No sound had reached those within the circle to tell them that their messengers had met with any difficulty in their duty.

The old scout listened intently to ascertain if there was any commotion, but no sound reached him.

Impatient at the delay, Lone Wolf sent another brave to hasten the captives; and, as this warrior, in a fast run reached the cottonwoods, he fell prostrate over his dead comrades in arms.

Springing to his feet, the Apache gazed downward, and that instant a lasso noose encircled his neck, and ere a yell of warning could burst from his throat, he was drawn high up in the trees by ready hands, the knife of Old Rocky instantly piercing his heart.

At this moment a high sheet of flame arose from the basaltic cliff, which caused every warrior to bound to his feet, and gaze in consternation at a sight that roused all their superstitious fears. A long pole rested on the apex of one of the high rock towers, and from it dangled the body of an Apache brave, struggling in the agonies of death. No human form was in view upon the look-out stations except the squirming savage, and both sides of the valley's mouth were bathed in firelight. For a moment the Apache braves stared in amazement upon the struggles of the dying sentinel, and then the thunder-tones of Lone Wolf awakened them to action.

"Los diablos Texanos! Vamonos! Rolling Thunder will guard the white squaws! Come, warriors of the Pecos!" And, grasping their arms, sixty braves, with Lone Wolf in lead, sprung toward the entrance of their stronghold, while Rolling Thunder with some fifteen others dashed toward the gorge.

Rushing from the fires prevented their seeing the eleven Texans as each slipped down his lariat, and a fusillade of revolvers from men who never missed a mark laid every one of Rolling Thunder's warriors upon the sward, dead or dying.

"Hurra—a—a for us!" yelled Old Rocky.

And now, the volley of rifle and revolver shots that echoed from cliff and crag, seeming to be the fire of a thousand men, the wild yells of the braves as the leaden messengers tore through their vitals, caused the main party of braves under Lone Wolf to come to a sudden halt in great alarm at realizing that their stronghold had been attacked by some foe, of whose strength and character they were in ignorance. For an instant the Apache chief was puzzled and much alarmed. He knew not what to do. The bewildering events of the last few moments had demoralized his mind.

But he was not left long in an undecided state. On came the avengers, creating amid the hundreds of mustangs that were scattered over the valley, a terrific stampede toward the appalled Apaches.

"No quarter for the murderers of women and children!" thus yelled Fighting Ben, leading the right of the line.

"Down with the red devils. Remember Fort Mason and Palo Pinto!" cried Reckless Joe.

"Look sharp for Dark Dashwood the dare-devil fiend," yelled Daring Bill, on the left, as every man leveled his deadly Sharp's rifle, and blazed into the savage mass. Again and again did the Rangers charge through clouds of whirling arrows, and a rain of laden balls; each time driving the Apaches, with thinned ranks toward the illumined village where the bleached lodges loomed up ghastly against the dark mountain side.

A horde of hideous squaws were crouching in wonder and terror. The mystery of the little gorge was still unsolved. That death would be the fate of any one who approached the cottonwoods, they all knew. The night was pregnant

with disaster and death. The sun of Lone Wolf was sinking low down to the horizon.

But soon enough for the Apaches was it explained. As they were driven toward the crescent of lodges, and came abreast of the mouth of the gorge, a sheet of flame burst from the dense darkness, showing to the demoralized followers of Lone Wolf a line of determined Texans; and as the rifles belched their fire, half of the surviving Apaches bit the dust.

"Hist yerselves for fust class work, boys!"

This order, from Old Rocky, was unnecessary; for, as the Rangers fired, each dropped his rifle, and with revolver and bowie in hand, sprung at the Indians, who fled in a terrified mob toward their lodges, falling every moment under the fire of the Texans.

"Lone Wolf is my meat!" yelled Fighting Ben, as he sprung from his mustang and engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict with the Apache chief.

All paused to witness this fearful combat, which lasted but a little space; for the death-yell of Lone Wolf soon sounded, as the bowie of Ben Thompson pierced his painted breast.

Every eye now became fastened upon two others who were observed advancing upon each other, and all recognized Colonel Somers and Dark Dashwood, the paint from the face of the latter having been partially rubbed off in the fight.

"Dark Dashwood!" cried Colonel Somers. "My life-long enemy! You who stole my only child, murdered Ernest, and tore my wife and adopted daughters from my arms. If you never prayed before, pray now, for you will stand before the throne of your Creator and Judge to receive condemnation for your dastard deeds!"

Old Rocky now appeared with the women, who were clinging to each other, and moving slowly over the ground, filled with pain from their long-cramped limbs, and struck with horror as they saw their protector and Dark Dashwood advancing toward each other with glittering bowies in their hands.

"Say your own prayers, John Somers! I'm worth a dozen dead men yet, as you will soon find out, to your cost. If I die, it will be when my revenge is complete; not before."

Both men sprung at each other. The steel flashed in the firelight as back and forth they fought. Suddenly Dark Dashwood made a single desperate bound toward the group of women, seized Hattie, and sprung toward the darkness of the gorge.

Quick and unsuspected as this movement was, Colonel Somers was speedily on his track. Before half the space was traversed, the bowie-knife of the much-wronged man was buried in his enemy's breast.

Grasping Hattie, who had half fainted from horror, he returned to the group of terrified women, and delivered her once more to their care. This done, he returned to the side of the prostrate outlaw, and grasping the belt of the renegade, dragged him toward the lodges into the firelight.

"Dark Dashwood!" he said, as he dropped the wretch to the earth. "I know you are not dead. I did not intend to kill you outright. Tell me, and give yourself some hope of mercy from your God, where is my daughter Goldie, whom you stole from me so many years ago?"

The eyes of the renegade slowly opened, fairly glowing upon him in agony and revenge.

"Had you come to this valley a month ago, John Somers, you would have found your daughter here. I tell you the truth now, only to cause you to curse yourself for what you have missed by your neglect. She is now gone. I will not tell you where; but you will never see her face again. She has been reared a savage, and she is a wandering savage now. Your adopted son has long since been torn to pieces by the wolves; and, by the fiends, I came near sending the whole of you to h—ll!"

As the last word burst from his lips he struggled frantically, the blood spurted from his mouth and nostrils, and the shadows of the unknown world were mirrored in his glassy eyes.

Suddenly, the desperate renegade gathered all his remaining muscular force, and sprung to his feet, his eyes glaring horribly, his right hand raised in the air, and cried, in an unnatural, death-stricken voice:

"John Somers, I've come to make my usual visit, uninvited! I, Dark Dashwood, the Dare-devil, sworn to follow you and yours to the death!"

The massive, robust form of the outlaw trembled, his arms fell limp by his side, the blood gushed from his mouth, and Dark Dashwood fell dead at the feet of those he had so terribly wronged!

CHAPTER XXXVI. THE RETREAT.

ALL are filled with joy and thankfulness at the camp of Child-of-the-Sun, for their sick guest has recovered his strength and walks proudly beneath the cool shades with his fair nurse and foster-sister.

The Apache maidens have all learned to admire the White Chief, for so they call him; his gentleness and fortitude through great suffering,

and the kindness and regard with which he treats them, together with his words of gratitude in their own tongue, have made them all his true and steadfast adherents.

It needs but a single glance to see that Child-of-the-Sun and Ernest Somers are deeply in love with each other. Not a word or look from either that does not speak unlimited and changeless affection, and the circumstances all tend toward cementing these two young hearts.

As they walk the camp they present a picture of grace, and love, and beauty, pleasant to look upon.

Having recovered sufficiently to ride, Ernest being very anxious to return to his friends, is urging upon Child-of-the-Sun the policy and necessity of immediate departure toward the Rio Brazos, as there she will meet her long-mourning parents, who have been deprived of her love and presence since childhood.

It needs no very long or urgent pleading from his lips to prevail upon the fair girl to order a mount, although they have all become greatly attached to the beautiful camp, which has been so lucky and pleasant a home for them that the time has passed like a summer's dream.

As this movement is decided upon, the maidens saddle the ponies that are full of life and fresh for the trail, having had the benefit of these rich grazing grounds for so long a time, and prepare for their journey toward the East.

In a short time the cavalcade of beauty, led by Ernest Somers and Child-of-the-Sun is headed toward the Brazos; the former, clad in a finely-beaded suit of buckskin made by the Apache girls, while a wide-brimmed sombrero, woven from the river-reeds by the same deft fingers, finishes his costume.

We have now started our fairy company speeding over the prairies, escorted by the young Mazeppa of the Brazos, along the same course that had been taken by the maddened mustang. Over this trail he had been borne, bound and suffering intense agony, across the plains from the home of the only friends he knew on earth, into the keeping of one who, in a short time, had caused the earth to appear like a heaven to him, and had created dreams new and strangely intoxicating, causing his past life to appear like an empty void.

The merry, girlish laughter, the snort of impatient steeds, the bracing prairie air and silvery-surrounding voices of the fair beings around him, caused him to forget for the time the denizens of the Somers settlement, who, unknown to him, had passed through such fearful scenes and deadly dangers.

About the same time that Ernest and his fair attendants were preparing to leave their camp on Ebbell's Creek, our Ranger friends, with the rescued captives, were also making ready to leave the scene of desperate battle—the death-strewn camp of the Apaches, beyond the mountains of the Pecos.

The destination of both parties was the same point, the Somers settlement; but Ernest and his female escort had but a short distance to travel, when compared with the long and tedious trail from the Apache valley.

The Rangers, knowing the privations to be encountered upon a direct course, decided upon a more southern route, as they intended driving the vast herd of animals that had been stolen by the Indians from Fort Mason, together with the mustangs of the Apaches, which were theirs by right of conquest.

They also knew that the squaws of the dead braves would give information, and start another war-party down upon them; and it was consequently necessary for their safety that they should leave the valley as soon as possible.

A grand bonfire was made of the lodges, after all useful plunder had been removed. Some twenty of the captured mules having been packed with robes and horse gear.

Since the tragic end of Dark Dashwood, Old Rocky, Aunt Martha, Col. Somers and wife, together with Hattie and Mamie, Joe Booth, and Bill and Ben Thompson had retired, away from the vicinity of the confusion and the sight of the ghastly slain, to congratulate each other on the happy termination of what came so near being the most fearful death to the female portion of the party.

Many were the tears that were shed. Many times did the colonel press his recovered darlings to his breast, and the Rangers spoke words of cheer and kindness to those who had escaped such terrible dangers.

Not a word was spoken in regard to Child-of-the-Sun; but Colonel Somers and his wife gazed at each tree and bush and rock, as objects dear to them, their darling one having most probably tripped among them a thousand times.

Since the dying words of Dark Dashwood, both had given up in their hearts all hopes of ever again meeting their lost child; and congratulated themselves, while they thanked God that they were still preserved to glide over the trail of life together, and that Aunt Martha, with Hattie and Mamie, were still preserved to them.

There was also a sense of great relief in their hearts to know that the fiend who had caused them so much misery lay stark and stiff in

death, among the corpses of his savage allies, and could no longer bring disaster and misery upon their home.

In their hearts they could not resist questioning the justice of the Giver of all good, in permitting so inhuman a monster so long to have lived and caused so much anguish and grief to them.

Worn down by tortures of mind and body, the women soon fell into peaceful slumbers, watched by loving eyes; and when the morning sun peeped smilingly into the Apache Valley, a hasty breakfast was eaten, and then Old Rocky, his face beaming like the sunshine on the rocks, yelled:

"Hist yerselves lively, boys! Hustle roun' an' git ther bull outfit ready ter glide toward ther Brazos. Joe, pick out yer guard ter freeze ter ther pack-mules, an' some other pards ter keep ther loose stock on ther trail. Bill kin act advance guard, an' Ben kin perfect us ag'inst any rapscallion a-comin' butt ag'in' us from behind."

In this order, Daring Bill in advance, the herd of horses and mules, the women and their protectors, Col. Somers, Rocky, Fighting Ben and Reckless Joe, with their "pards" in the rear where danger was the most liable to assail them, they left the scene of conflict. Left the beautiful valley, now changed to a charnel-house; the sky filled with red-jawed buzzards, the coyotes lurking here and there among the stunted cedars and pines, toward their anticipated ghoul-like feast.

High up over their heads as they passed the towering portals, hung the two dead sentinels, suspended from the ends of poles, at a dizzy height, swaying slowly in the breeze; an arm of one of the dead braves elevated and held by a shroud of rope, pointing toward the dread horrors of the Apache Valley!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ON THE BRAZOS.

DENNIS MCCAFFERTY and the negro Jim, as might be supposed, had a lonely time at the bend after the departure of the Rangers.

The mangled bodies of the Indians, scattered about, the blackened pickets of the corral, presented a sight which worked upon their superstitious imaginings; and besides, Jim was full of grief at the death of his wife. Both, however, went to work with energy to remove the hideous corpses of the Apaches before the shadows of night should fall upon the earth.

The pickets, blown out by the explosion, were collected together and piled in a heap, and the dead Indians were dragged from all parts of the bend and thrown upon it, after which Dennis applied fire, and all were speedily cremated.

All signs of the conflict that it was possible to remove were obliterated, and they went to work to repair the fence; and thus, by continued labor, kept their minds more free from the thoughts of the terrible event that had so suddenly depopulated the settlement.

At night the Irishman and negro retired to the upper story of the colonel's house, securely barring the doors below; and, with their arms by their sides, passed the nights, frequently alarmed by the shrieks of panthers which they thought were the war-cries of the Apaches.

Knowing that they could not herd the stock, they salted the cattle at the corral for the first few nights very sparingly, and afterwards the animals returned without trouble, thus giving the two men ample time to repair all damages.

Neither Dennis nor Jim dared go up the river toward the cave, and they always shuddered whenever their attention was drawn in that direction by any unusual noise.

Thus passed the time until some three weeks after the Rangers had started to rescue the captives; when, one day as both were seated on the veranda cleaning their rifles, they were startled by a shout from over the river, and to their surprise discovered a human form standing upon what they considered an unlucky spot—namely, the huge boulder.

Although but one man was to be seen, such was their distrust and fear, that they both rushed within the house, closed the door, and gained the roof where, through a trap-door, they could look over the Brazos.

To the horror of both men they now recognized the voice and form of Ernest Somers, and both stood silent, their teeth chattering with terror.

"Mother of Moses! Just as I expected," gasped the Irishman at last; "our time has come. God stand between us an' all harrum! May I never see Ould Ireland again if it isn't the ghost of Misther Airnest that was kilt en-

tirely! Upon me sowl it's Dennis McCafferty that doesn't know what to do, at all, at all. Take a luck out, Jim. Be the powers of Moll Kelly, I'm not aquil till it mesilf."

The Irishman's fear only served to increase the terror of the negro, who cowered beneath the log eaves and refused to make the required observation.

Cocking his rifle, Dennis pointed the weapon at the negro, saying in a voice of command:

"Now, be cripes, Jim, if ye don't put yer head out I'll shoot ye, if it's the last time I ever hould a gun. I'm not afther goin' till be thrified wid, an' I've seen enough in this devil of a counthry till make me desperate."

Frightened still more by his immediate danger, for he saw shoot in the Irishman's eye, the negro slowly raised his head through the trap.

Gora'mighty! Marse Dinnis! dat spook done cl'ared out!"

Dennis was quickly by the side of Jim, and gazing at the boulder, but nothing was to be seen. Scratching his head in bewilderment, he inquired:

"Jim, wern't yees afther seein' an' hearin' him yersilf?"

"Sw'ar ter grashus, ef it war de las' time dis chile has ter spoke, I done see Marse Ernest, sho'!"

Without another word they both rushed below, as fast as they had gone up, and proceeded out on the clear space opposite the house, their attention centered on the boulder and its surroundings, and each holding his rifle in his hand.

Suddenly the huge gate of the corral swung open, and out from the inclosure, at a gallop, rode Ernest Somers, Child-of-the-Sun and the female attendants of the latter.

At the first glimpse of this strange cavalcade, headed by a man whom he supposed to be dead, Dennis gave a bound toward the river, striking Jim as he went, and, both falling, their rifles exploded, and each believed himself to be in the grasp of the Evil One.

They were soon, however, brought to a sense of the situation by peals of laughter from the maidens, and the voice of Ernest, so natural and so far removed from anything which they had supposed could appertain to a ghost, that both sat upon the ground staring in amazement, not unmixed with dread, at the new arrivals.

"Dennis McCafferty, and you Jim," said Ernest Somers, "what is the reason you conduct yourselves in this manner? Don't you know your old friend?"

Then examining the settlement with anxious eye, he added:

"Where are all our people? Has father gone back to the Guadalupe?"

Dennis arose to his feet, and followed by Jim, slowly approached Ernest, each grasping one of his hands.

"God be wid ye! Sure it's yersilf afther all!" broke from Dennis. "I thought ye were kilt long ago, an' it was yer ghost over there beyant. Where the devil has yees been? Gone till the Guadalupe, is it? Sure yer father, an' Ould Rocky, an' the Rangers, has gone afther the red haythen that has tuck yer mother, an' yer aunt, an' the ger-rils, off wid them, afther scalpin' all of the herders an' the winmin folks, but mesilf an' Jim!"

"Great Heavens! What next?" exclaimed Ernest. "My poor father! It was a black day that we left the Guadalupe; but we must follow and save them from the red fiends, or perish. When did they leave the bend, Dennis! How long since this fearful catastrophe happened?"

"Three weeks it is since they tuck the trail. Sure ye'd never find them if yees wint."

"What Indians were they who attacked the settlement?"

"Lone Wolf, an' thim devils of Dashwood's."

At the mention of Lone Wolf, the Apache maidens buddled together, and glanced in a frightened manner about the forest shades, while Child-of-the-Sun laid her hand gently upon Ernest's arm, and inquired:

"The White Chief has heard bad talk. Will he tell Child-of-the-Sun why his smiles have flown away?"

The sad and totally unexpected news thus told by Dennis caused Ernest such anguish that for the moment he had forgotten his fair charge, and when he felt her delicate touch, and heard her sympathizing voice, his sorrow was partly drowned by the thought of the great joy in

store for them, if the captives should only be rescued and restored to their homes.

"White Chief has told Child-of-the-Sun," answered Ernest, "that he would take her to her father and mother. This is their home, but Lone Wolf and his braves have been here. They have taken many white scalps, and have carried your mother to the Apache valley. Your father and the white warriors of Texas are on the trail. They will kill Lone Wolf, and you will see your father before many suns. I feel this. I know it. Let us act as if it were to be."

Turning to Dennis and Jim, Ernest added in English:

"This young lady is the long-lost daughter of Colonel Somers. You remember, Jim, when she was stolen on the Guadalupe. At some other time I will inform you both of the particulars of my escape, and of hers also. But we are nearly famished. Can you give us something to eat?"

"Ate, is it, Mither Airnest? Be the piper of Ballinasloe, but we'll be afther givin' yees slathers till ate, immagitly. An' that's the gerril that was carried off be the red haythen? Upon me sowl I never heard the likes o' that in me life?"

Jim took his battered sombrero from his woolly pate, and advancing toward the cavalcade, extended his hand to Child-of-the-Sun.

"Gora'mighty bress de day dat fotch de little Miss Goldie back to marse an' missus! Dis niggaw war mighty young when de red debbils stole her, but he 'members all about it. I reckon Marse John 'll jes' go wild wid joy when he done git back, an' missus 'll jes' cry herself to deff."

Child-of-the-Sun could not understand a word of this address, but she laid her delicate white palm in the broad black hand, and Jim darted off the next moment, dancing like a lunatic, followed by Dennis, to one of the cabins to prepare food for their welcome guests.

"Begorra, Jim," said Dennis, "but the bind is jist full of angels now, barrin' the wings. Be cripes, we'll feed them so well that they'll stay wid us, and not l'ave us alone wid the ghots again."

Ernest, as soon as Dennis and Jim had left them, sprung from his mustang, and assisted Child-of-the-Sun to dismount, while the Apache maids touched the ground at the same moment. A few words from Ernest, and the saddles and bridles were removed, and the mustangs staked to graze; then the maidens spread their robes on the veranda, and reclined for rest after their long and weary ride, until Dennis and Jim spread a tempting repast before them.

For two weeks Child-of-the-Sun and her maids occupied the house of Colonel Somers, where she gradually recognized many articles of furniture and pictures which had been brought thither by her parents, as well as her childish toys, which they had carefully preserved, and which were now brought out by Ernest for her inspection. Ascertaining the exact day on which Colonel Somers, with Old Rocky and the Rangers, had departed for Apache land, Ernest was enabled, from information that he had previously gained, to calculate very near the time when they might be expected, and binding Dennis and Jim to secrecy, he arranged a plot with them.

He had never for a moment allowed himself to doubt a happy termination of the expedition against Lone Wolf. He firmly believed that all those who were missing from the settlement would return. As a matter of course he had been informed by Dennis and Jim of the massacre of the women and children at the cave, and of the death of the herders in the fierce fight with the Indians.

His plot with Dennis and Jim was that a look-out be kept from the boulder, and that when the Rangers and the rescued captives should be seen returning he, with Child-of-the-Sun and the Apache maidens, should saddle up and gallop down the river, where they would encamp until they saw fit to make themselves known.

This would be a grand and joyful surprise to all concerned. Colonel Somers, Old Rocky and the Rangers, together with the rescued women, would be very much relieved and thankful at reaching the bend once more after so long and tedious a journey. No doubt they had given up all hope of ever again seeing their lost daughter since they had been beyond the Rio Pecos, and they, of course, looked upon himself as dead; consequently the appearance

of both could not fail to transport them to the seventh heaven of delight.

This project promised a most grand and joyous surprise, and the sight of their unspeakable happiness would repay the brave Rangers for all the privations experienced on their difficult and hazardous trail. Dennis and Jim were delighted at the thought of assisting in this plan in every way in their power; in fact they were proud of the honor of being humble workers in a plot which must have such a happy ending. This being decided on, everything that had been brought from Apache-land by the maidens was stored away in a loft where no one would be likely to discover them, until there should no longer be any need of concealment.

Child-of-the-Sun and her maids were themselves delighted when this plan was explained to them by Ernest, and, all being now in readiness, they impatiently awaited the return of the expedition. Dennis and Jim took turns at watching the western plain from the boulder over the river.

On the afternoon of the second day after Ernest had made the arrangements that have been detailed, while the young Texan was supremely happy basking in the smiles of Child-of-the-Sun, both being seated upon the veranda, they were brought to their feet by a cry from Dennis, who was acting sentinel at the boulder.

Looking upward, they saw the Irishman dancing and gesticulating like a madman, and the next instant he yelled:

"Thunder an' turf, Mither Airnest! they bees comin' dis-canthering over the perrary. Be cripes, yees has till be lively, an' get away as fast as yees can."

Ernest spoke hurriedly to Child-of-the-Sun, who immediately gave orders to her maids, and very soon all was confusion at the bend, as they saddled their ponies and prepared to vanish.

Accustomed as they were to their animals, the maidens were soon in the saddle, and all, led by Ernest, galloped through the corral, and down the river, disappearing quickly from view, and leaving no sign of their presence that would be liable to attract the attention of even Old Rocky and the Rangers.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

WITH a knowledge of the keen delight in store for his kind friends in his mind, Dennis redoubled his cries of welcome, and trampled the prairie flowers in a dance that would have done him credit with the Indians.

Although much fatigued, the Rangers rent the air with hearty laughter at the ludicrous actions of the Irishman; and even Old Rocky, Colonel Somers, and the ladies could not repress a smile, the old scout exclaiming in a loud voice:

"How-dy, Dennis? Ther reds hain't gobbled yer up yit. How's things at ther bend?"

"God be wid yees all, they're all right, Mither Rocky. It's Dinnis that's been afther cryin' his eyes out a'most afther yees. Be the powers of powdher, but it's an illegant sight till see yees back. The Vargin be praised! May yees niver have any more bad luck, Curn'il Somers; be jabers ye've had yer share intirely!"

"Thank you, Dennis," returned the colonel. "I have been sorely tried through life, but I thank the Giver of all Good, that I have not been left alone in the world, as I had every reason to fear a short time since. I hope that the stock have not been stampeded again."

"Divil a wan gone, yer honor! Mesilf an' Jim has tuck the best of care o' thim."

"I am glad to hear it," said the colonel; then turning to the Rangers, he added:

"Mr. Thompson, we ought, I think, to turn to the left and ford the river above the bend."

"All right!" agreed Fighting Ben.

"By twos, forward!"

Again the sadly-worn cavalcade started over the prairie, soon reaching the river and fording the stream, and at the corral were by the time Dennis had returned by the swinging lariat.

Jim, showing his double row of ivories, stood with tattered hat in hand, and welcomed them with joy beaming upon his ebony face.

With grateful hearts, Colonel Somers and his family once more crossed the threshold of their home, and found themselves again amid familiar objects.

The Rangers, highly elated at having made

a fortunate end to their long trail, and at the prospect of plenty of food and rest for some time, picketed their horses, and soon had a camp established among the bottom timber, inside the inclosed bend.

Dennis and Jim drove in the stock, and slaughtered and prepared a four year old steer, and a grand supper was soon under way; a dozen camp-fires blazing within the bend.

Night soon spread her sable curtain over the earth, and after supper, the colonel, Old Rocky, and the ladies seated themselves upon the veranda to enjoy the cool evening air, and were soon joined by the Fighting Thompsons and Reckless Joe.

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, "I have not found time to thank you for your noble services to me and mine. The devotion and bravery you have shown cannot be repaid by idle words."

"Colonel Somers," interrupted Joe, "you ought to know us well enough to dispense with any talk of that character. We do not fight for thanks, or for reward. We battle for the relief of the suffering, and because it is our duty to the Lone Star State. And he who would stand aloof when women are in danger, and when the innocent are massacred, hasn't the fraction of a man in his make-up."

"That's the talk," said Ben; "and, colonel, while we remain with you, oblige us by never again mentioning this subject, as it is embarrassing to all of us. Does it not repay us all a thousand times to see your family once more around you, with a prospect of every happiness in the future?"

"Mr. Thompson," returned the colonel; "I am truly thankful that I am again at home, and that these dear ones who were torn from me by the fiendish Apaches are safe; but real happiness I shall never know until my darling daughter and my lost son Ernest are counted among my family circle. Their recovery being an improbable event—indeed they must both be dead—you can judge what my future will be, with an ever-aching void in my heart; a painful yearning, as long as life lasts, to press them to my breast."

"I tell yer, curn'il," broke out Old Rocky suddenly; "I'm feelin' dif'rent 'gards 'em since I've bin ter ther mountain. Dark Dashwood, 'fore he glided inter ther brimstone biz—'scuse me, ladies—spit out ther fact that yer leetle gal hed bin thar a month afore. I puts hit up thet she scooted when Lone Wolf struck out on the rampage, an' hit are likely she are on ther scout to find white folks. Hit won't never do ter gi'n up hopin'. Yer knows hit were a slim show fer ther weemin when Lone Wolf gobbled 'em, but we corraled 'em, an' ther 'Paches bes gi'n ther last yelp."

Thus the conversation was kept up among the party on the veranda. Little did they suppose that those about whom they were conversing were not a rifle-shot away; that the darkness hid them from sight.

The Apache maidens, under directions from Ernest, had pulled armfuls of dry grass, and deposited it in front of the boulder, stretching on both sides for some distance.

Remembering the weird effect that had been produced by the illumination of Dark Dashwood on a previous occasion, Ernest prepared to form a tableau, that would chain the admiration, and excite the wonder of all within the bend who might witness it.

The grass was placed below the boulder, and down the river bank at such a distance that the top of the huge rock would be above the flames, which would show them all distinctly, and then die away in a lurid glow slowly dissolving into the darkness.

It is impossible to portray in words the feelings of Ernest, as he saw his beloved friends on the veranda by the light of the camp-fires, or the strange emotions in the heart of Child-of-the-Sun, when the parents, whom she had not seen since she was a child, were pointed out to her.

Every arrangement having thus been made, the Apache maidens took position in a line on each side of the boulder, while Ernest, with his right arm encircling Child-of-the-Sun stood upon the rock.

At a low signal, one of the maids at the extremity of the line was to ignite the grass.

The old scout was puffing away at his pipe, listening to Reckless Joe's account of the massacre at Fort Mason, his eyes from force of habit, glancing over the river toward the scene of so many strange events, when a slight fire-flash met his view.

Springing to his feet in alarm, he had only time to utter an exclamation of surprise which directed all eyes to the opposite bank, when a sheet of flame, some twenty feet long and four feet in height, burst quickly up amid the Egyptian darkness, showing plainly Ernest Somers and Child-of-the-Sun upon the rock, with six Apache maidens on either side.

There was a sudden cocking of revolvers, a rallying cry from Fighting Ben, as if danger was apprehended, and then a hush of wonder and admiration fell upon each startled observer.

Such was the bewildering beauty of the scene, that not a word was spoken by the paralyzed spectators.

Suddenly the painful silence was broken by a shriek, and Mrs. Somers fell fainting into the arms of her husband.

This was followed by a wild cry from Colonel Somers.

"Ernest, my dear son! Can this be real?"

Had there been a war-party of savages revealed by this weird fire-light, all would at once have rushed to the defense of the bend; but a sight, so totally unexpected and so unaccountable, demoralized them, and more so as the figures were silent and motionless.

As soon as the dry grass had been consumed, the maids, followed by Ernest and Child-of-the-Sun, sprung into the bottom timber where Ernest had bridged the river by felling two huge trees, this bridge being just inside the bounds of the corral fence.

Leading his fair charge over, the light from the camp of the Rangers showing them the way, he placed her in the midst of the maidens, and marched ahead of them out from the timber into the clearing of the bend.

The attention of all was, by this time, directed to the bowlder, where Old Rocky and others had gone to investigate the mystery. The fires about the bend had been replenished, and in the bright light before the ranch, were Colonel Somers and the ladies.

Mrs. Somers had recovered, but was still, as were they all, in a strangely-bewildered state, when the bevy of beauties, with Ernest in their lead, appeared around the corner of the house, and the next instant stood before them.

A wild cry of joy from the Rangers, who gathered from all points, recalled Old Rocky and the other wanderers, as the tableau again met their view.

A moment, the colonel and Ernest looked at each other.

"Thank God! My son!"

"Father!" and Ernest was in his arms.

Soon all were welcoming Ernest with shouts, as one from the dead, but none paying any attention to his strange companions in the background, except the Rangers, who were gazing in wonder and admiration.

Before the first glad surprise was well over, Ernest turned toward the group, and taking the hand of Child-of-the-Sun, he led her forward.

"Father! mother!" he said, "your sufferings and anxieties are at an end. God has seen fit, in a most miraculous way, to use me as an humble instrument in restoring to your arms your long-lost daughter! Goldie Somers, or Child-of-the-Sun, these are your father and your mother!"

"Great God, again I thank Thee! Forgive my many doubts of your justice and mercy!"

These were John Somers's words, as his trembling arms clasped the golden-haired Apache prophetess; and, at the same instant, Mrs. Somers, with tottering steps, reached out and clung to both. Aunt Martha, Hattie and Mamie, fell upon their knees in silent gratitude.

Surrounded by a throng of wonder-stricken Rangers, among whom there was not a dry eye, the Apache maids, their arms folded, gazed upon their mistress with half-joyful, half-jealous glances.

The scene was one never to be forgotten, and which it is impossible for pen to describe.

No eye at the bend closed on that eventful night. Huge fires illuminated all around them, and joy and thankfulness unbounded ruled in every heart.

CHAPTER XXXIX. COMING EVENTS.

GOLDIE SOMERS, unable as she was to speak English, proposed to give an account of her past life to her parents and friends, through Ernest as interpreter, and all listened in breathless silence to the silvery Spanish, those who

did not understand her words awaiting eagerly for the pauses and the clear explanations from Ernest that followed.

"Child-of-the-Sun has had many dreams," she began. "She now knows that they were not dreams. She has looked in the eyes of her father and mother. She has seen that love lives in their hearts. She knows the tears of sorrow that have been dropped for her while she was with Lone Wolf in Apache-land. She is now with the people of her own color, and she is glad. She will learn their talk. The birds sing more sweetly. The flowers are more beautiful, now that the war-cries of the Apaches no longer fill her ears. Child-of-the-Sun has room in her heart for all her friends. She has friends that are white. She has friends that are red, who have come on the long trail with her, and must stay with her always. She would die if her maids, who have been so good to her, should go back to the Apaches. The heart of Child-of-the-Sun is full of love for all. She has spoken."

"An' right ter ther p'int. I be dog-goned ef she hain't," said Old Rocky, as he squeezed the hand of Aunt Martha on the sly. "She air the purtiest piece o' culiker—buckskin an' beads, I mean—I ever sot eyes on. I tell yer, boys, I reckon we-uns is jist ther happiest old crowd this side o' Paradise. We has come outen a heap o' trouble, an' come out shinin' like a new doubloon. Curn'l, wipe that tear outen yer left peeper. Yer ortent ter 'low hit ter break kiver."

"It is a tear of joy, my good friend," said Colonel Somers; "but I ought to drop many a one of sorrow, when I think of those who were so inhumanly butchered in defense of me and mine."

"I thought a heap o' them, myself, curn'l," said the old scout, sadly; "an' I feels a gnawin' at my gizzard every time I thinks of 'em now. But a Providence, what allers knows best, has 'lowed our pards ter be wiped outen egg-sistence by a roarin' set o' heathens, an' all we kin do will never fotch 'em back. I did hev a lingerin' s'picion that they is a danged sight better fixed than we-uns, but es I gazes aroun' me now, I kinder goes back onter hit. I 'lows now ther hain't no set of folkse, dead or kick-in', what's better fixed nor we-uns."

Although Old Rocky's speech was delivered in saddened sincerity, and with a genuine hope of comforting the heart of his friend, the words, far different from the impression which he intended, served to keep up the spirit of joyousness that was in danger of being broken or clouded by the remarks of the colonel.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Fighting Ben, as he tossed the stub of his cigarette over his shoulder, "I am happy to see such a joyful ending to the tragic scenes that have occurred since we became acquainted, but as I have had before me the fact that we must soon part, duty calling us over other bloody trails toward the North-west, I sincerely hope we shall have the extreme pleasure of meeting again, though it's doubtful. Colonel Somers, I would not advise you to leave this location, although you have had such bitter cause. We shall be always on the alert to prevent war-parties from coming this way, and when we are called out of service by Governor Houston, I should judge from what I have noticed in this camp that some of my prairie pards will see fit to stay, and help to defend the Somers settlement."

At this point in Ben's speech many of the Rangers, who had been conversing with the Apache girls in broken Spanish, as well as two who seemed to be on growing terms of intimacy with Mamie and Hattie, made motion to draw away; but they were too late, for all eyes were upon them as Fighting Ben spoke.

"I beg your pardon, boys," he continued; "but it is nothing to be ashamed of. If I had not left my heart in the keeping of as fair and good a girl as there is in the Lone Star State, I should be as deeply interested as any of you. But to proceed, Colonel Somers: hold your position here at the bend. There is no better grazing country in the world, and before six months have passed you will have considerable accessions to your colony, which, with your natural advantages for defense, will free you from fear of any serious disaster such as you have already experienced, and—"

"Hold, me lord!" interrupted Reckless Joe; "dost think the Cleopatra of the Occident, wreathed in the golden rays ravished from the god of day, will sit and listen to you for the next decade. She wants a change. Give

Joseph a show to air his eloquence. There are times that try men's souls. Those times with us have happily past, for the present. There are times that try men's hearts. They have come to us now. Gaze at me! Pity me! Ladies and gentlemen, examine each lineament of me countenance. Mark the grand expansive brow of Italian marble—alabaster is too common, and besides, it wouldn't pass, as I haven't been to the creek since I built the fire. List to the modulations of me musical voice. Take in the dimensions of me noble form, and call me Apollo. Call me by that ancient and honorable appellation, but don't approach me, don't scourge me, don't cast your eyes upon me if you feel that you ought to meet glances of responsive affection. I'm an orphan, far from home; but I've previously met a feminine in San Antonio who has me word of honor that I will be true to her, and true I am. But don't press me. Feel for me. I am weak; and surrounded by such intoxicating beauties that I feel like a stuck pig to think I'm not a Mormon. Why was I reared to look upon a plurality of petticoats as a sin? Echo answers, why? I can stand this agony no longer. I was born lovable, and I hanker in a double-barreled way for reciprocal affection. Lead in me noble steed. Give me a lift astride, and show me the western sun, for a faintness hovers over me!"

"Hould on a bit," cried Dennis; "I'll be after the horse! Begorra, but Misther Joe's goin' mad as a hatter, an' it's better he should take a ride!"

The Rangers soon took leave of their friends at the bend, to follow Comanche trails toward the Red River; and Colonel Somers, instilled with new life and energy by recovering his lost children, made arrangements for fencing and putting in crops of corn and wheat, while Ernest devoted his leisure to the agreeable task of giving Goldie Somers lessons in love and English.

Old Rocky kept the settlement in game, and during one of his stolen moments with Aunt Martha, prevailed upon that worthy woman to take the trail of life in his company, giving him the right, as he said—

"Ter perfect her from painters an' all sich. 'For,' reasoned the old scout, 'I never see'd nothin' what crawls, swims or flies what hadn't his mate. Even a painter hes a pard what he freezes ter under all difficulties, an' bit's tuff if this ole coon hes ter be left out inter the cold allers.'"

In this way was this important alliance cemented, and everything pointed to a full harvest in the matrimonial line, as Hattie and Mamie were now engaged to two worthy young Texans, serving in the ranks of the Rangers, and a blind man could not fail to perceive that Ernest and Goldie Somers would not know happiness again if parted from each other.

CHAPTER XL.

A CLOUDLESS SKY.

WE will now pass over six months, which were one continual summer's dream to those in whom we have become most interested.

During this time many improvements have been made at the bend.

Another extensive log house, the exact counterpart of the residence of Col. Somers, has been erected on the east side of the bend, and many thatched huts built by the Apache maids; while extensive stacks of golden corn and wheat stand near the corral, which has also an addition on the eastern side for the horses and mules.

Where the swinging lariat hung, there is now suspended a light bridge of poles, that can be detached at the outer end, and allowed to hang, thus cutting off all communication with the bend.

The cave up the stream has been beautified by loving male and female hands; many of the trees around it having been cut down, and the underbrush removed to permit the entrance of the sun's rays. Trailing vines and flowers have been planted, and the mouth of the cavern has been built up to prevent intrusion, leaving a door in the center of what will be the future burial place of the Somers colony.

It is a bright and sunny afternoon that we introduce the reader again and for the last time to those whom we have followed over bloody trails and through heart-rending trials.

It is evident that some important ceremony is about to take place, as the houses and

cabins are profusely decorated with flowers, and throngs of people are all in gala dress.

Child-of-the-Sun, or Goldie Somers, and her maids are, as we first saw them, glittering in the fanciful costumes of Apache-land, and seated upon robes opposite the veranda; while the colonel, with Ernest, Mrs. Somers, Hattie, Mamie, and Aunt Martha are seated near them—all, as we have said, beaming with happiness, and occasionally glancing upward toward the bowlder.

In place of the cloud of gloom, and the wan appearance that so long marked Col. Somers and his wife, both are now in the flush of health, and seem to have grown many years younger.

But now all eyes are drawn over the river by a yell which they all recognize, and Old Rocky springs from his mustang, secures the lariat to a tree, and comes rushing like a boy over the bridge of poles, and soon is in their midst. As he stands, and fans himself with his sombrero, it is evident that he has returned from a long and hurried ride! Hasty words of greeting from all welcome the old scout, which he returns in his own original way and words.

One sweep of his keen eye around the circle, shows his sincere regard for all, but it lingers as his glance meets that of Aunt Martha, and he exclaims, with a self-satisfied air:

"Dog-goned glad ter find yer all hunk an' happy; an' hit's a sight that kinder helps a human ter 'magine what's comin' arter he's passed in his chips; that is, ef he's bin squar' an' white. Ther boys is a-comin', jist a-b'ilin', an' they's got a gospel-slinger 'long wi' them ter splice ther hull capoodle, an' he looks like a Mav'rick 'mong a herd of buffalors. Reckon he'll feel more civerlized when he sees this ranch, an' the kakker so thick around hit. Whar's thet Jim an' Dennis? They's got a heap of fodder ter cook."

Here the old scout was interrupted by the thunder of hoofs upon the plain, and the next instant, three-score of Rangers jerked their mustangs to a sudden halt, all in a line, in plain view and facing the scene below.

"Three cheers for the beauties of the Brazos!" And the clear voice of Fighting Ben rung out, followed by such cheers as never before sounded through the Brazos bottom.

Sombreros whirled in the air, mustangs pranced for a moment, and then in a wild gallop the Rangers dashed up the river to the ford, and before the blushing females had composed themselves, the Texan boys came through the corral gates, and up to the center of attraction on the colonel's veranda.

It was a truly joyous scene. A crowd of mingled bravery and beauty, of heroism and horses. Hands, worn hard by the grip of arms and bridle-reins, pressed the soft palms so eagerly extended.

Such was the extravagant enthusiasm, that a stranger who now rode up, dressed in seedy black, and brought his horse to a halt, looked on in surprise, not unmixed with apprehension.

The colonel extricated himself from the whirlpool of welcome, and with kind words and a hospitable manner ushered his guest into the house; finding, upon questioning him, that he was, as he supposed, the expected clergyman, whom the boys had left behind, and entirely forgotten in the excitement.

After the noise had subsided, a detail was made by Fighting Ben, for the purpose of preparing an extensive barbecue; and, as had been previously arranged, all was made ready for the approaching ceremony.

Before an archway of vines and flowers prepared for the occasion by the maidens who had come with Child-of-the-Sun, were seated Colonel Somers and wife, with the officiating clergyman awaiting the candidates for holy matrimony, who were now preparing for the occasion within doors.

By the side of this canopy stood Ben and Bill Thompson with Reckless Joe, the latter with his revolvers in hand, ready to shoot as a signal.

At a motion from the colonel Joe fired, and out walked Ernest Somers with Goldie leaning on his arm, presenting a striking picture of grace and beauty in her character of Apache prophetess.

Next came Old Rocky with Aunt Martha, the former vowing he'd "a dog-goned sight ruther face a war-party o' Pachees."

Then came Hattie and Mamie Somers, each clinging to the arm of the handsome Ranger

to whom her vows were soon to be pledged; and last, the twelve Apache girls, each escorted by a Texan.

Few senoritas of Mexico were the peers of these devoted maids of Child-of-the-Sun, and although four of the brave Rangers were linking their fate to a corresponding number of the fair Apache maidens, not one in the company considered that they had lowered themselves by so doing. On the contrary, all were proud of their worth and beauty, as they well might be.

It was an impressive scene, and one long to be remembered, and, as Colonel Somers blessed his restored children, tears of joy and thankfulness rolled down the cheeks of himself and wife.

As the clergyman finished the ceremony, Dennis McCafferty rushed around the corner of the house, flushed with his exertions in the extensive cooking arrangements that he had on hand, exclaiming with much earnestness:

"May the devil fly away wid ye, Misther Joe, for not fetchin' a praste along! Sure it's meself that's left out in the cowlid intirely. Be the powers, but it's a praste I'll have, if I has till go till San Antonio for him. All o' yees gettin' married, be gorra, an' the devil a wan o' yer thinkin' of Dinnis."

"Come here, Dennis! I'll splice you in a minute," cried out Reckless Joe.

"A divil of a marriage that 'ud be! I'll wait for a praste be gobs," and Dennis returned to his cooking.

Dear reader, imagine now our principal characters, promenading arm in arm over the prairie-flowers, awaiting the marriage feast; with Colonel Somers and his long-suffering wife, looking the joy and gratitude that they could not speak, that the black clouds which had hovered over their lives for so many years had sunk forever beneath the horizon, leaving their sky one broad sheet of sunshine.

And as Ernest, with Goldie as his wife, approached them full of love and trust, they do not wonder that Dark Dashwood, villain though he was, had not the heart to direct his savage allies to take her life when captured; or that Lone Wolf, the Apache demon, had worshiped her, and named her CHILD-OF-THE-SUN.

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